

E. E. CUMMINGS: THE MEANING OF THE SONNETS

By

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For my wife Joan

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E. E. Cummings' sonnets are studied as a representative sample of the poet's work which provides a significant insight into the development of his mature lebensphilosophie, defines an aesthetic stance against which his whole achievement can be measured, and reflects his innovative poetic technique.

Cummings defined the sonnet minimally as "a poem of fourteen iambic pentameters, none of them unrhymed." Aware of the sonnet tradition but unwilling to be restrained by it, he uses the form eclectically and experimentally, and his sonnets reflect his innovative handling of syntax, diction, punctuation, and typographical arrangement. His sonnet technique indicates his basic belief that the artist must be true to his own creative impulse without regard to the aesthetic dictates of tradition or form.

Beginning as a Platonic idealist, Cummings, in his early sonnets, conceives of existence as divided into two dichotomous yet related

realms; a temporal world bounded by birth and death, and an infinitely superior, timeless realm of the spirit. The phenomenal world is a corrupt, fallen version of the "actual" world of transcendence. "Most-people" live unhappily in the derived world, while the pure, perfect transcendental realm is felt to be remote, unattainable, and infinitely desirable. Cummings' early impulse is to satirize the corruption of the phenomenal and to seek escape into the noumenon. As he matures, he explores the problem of conducting his mortal life properly in order to attain transcendental life, and he discovers that moments of transcendental being may be gained through love, through the surrender of egoistic demands on others, and through the selfless acceptance of the reality of the phenomenal world. Such moments convince him that the phenomenal and noumenal are copresent, and that transcendence may be attained only through life in the phenomenal. He accepts death, once feared as the cessation of all being, as a necessity for transcendental birth, and he discovers that love, once a private spiritual and emotional state, is the binding force which unites all creation. The final phase of Cummings' philosophical growth is marked by his absolute acceptance of life in the temporal world. He accepts wholeheartedly the unity of temporal and timeless which he has felt from the beginning, and he learns that transcendence and living transcendently in the phenomenal are the same. He now submits himself entirely to the necessity of embracing all aspects of life, including failure and death, in order to achieve transcendence.

His final surrender to the reality of life in time and his

abandonment of the will to power over things place Cummings in the mainstream of modern literary thought and affirm his significance in modern American poetry.

INTRODUCTION

It is my intention in this study to make a critique of the sonnets of E. E. Cummings, and it is my thesis that these poems reflect, as a kind of microcosm of his whole work, his major themes as well as the growth of his vision of the way a man ought to conduct his life in the world. I believe that Cummings' sonnets provide a significant insight into the development of his mature lebensphilosophie and define an aesthetic stance against which his whole achievement can be measured.

In his second "non-lecture" at Harvard University in 1952, entitled "i and their son," Edward Estlin Cummings told his audience how he had been introduced to the sonnets of Dante Gabriel Rossetti: his Cambridge neighbor, the renowned Josiah Royce, having learned that the youth Cummings liked and wrote poetry, had invited him into his study, where he intoned "lovingly and beautifully, his favorite poems."¹ Cummings admitted to the suspicion, although not to the certainty, that this experience was the reason he had written sonnets throughout his career.

He had, in fact, known about sonnets for some time before Royce's invitation. Not only had his mother kept and read aloud from a commonplace book containing her favorite verse, but his Uncle George had given

¹E. E. Cummings, i: six non-lectures (New York: Atheneum, 1965), p. 30.

him a copy of Tom Hood's The Rhymester, a handbook which discusses the sonnet in some detail. Cummings told his Harvard listeners that it had been the experience of reading this book, subtitled "The Rules of Rhyme," that first introduced to him the concept of poetic form.

That Cummings found the sonnet a congenial medium is attested to by the frequency with which he wrote and published poems in this mode. Every volume of his poetry, from Tulips and Chimneys (1923) to the posthumously-published 73 Poems (1962), and including his contribution to Eight Harvard Poets (1918), contains sonnets. Roughly a quarter of Cummings' published verse consists of sonnets (208 of 770 in Complete Poems 1913 - 1962) - a surprising number if one recalls that Cummings is known primarily for his antitraditional innovations of form, and especially for his experiments in typographical arrangement, rather than for his¹ thought or traditionalism.

That is not to say, of course, that Cummings has been dismissed as simply a clever technical innovator, nor that his sonneteering has gone unnoticed. By and large, Cummings has been blessed with sympathetic and perceptive critics who have done justice to his art. But most of the analytical criticism of Cummings' poetry has been devoted either to general studies, such as Norman Friedman's E. E. Cummings: The Art of his Poetry or Robert Wegner's The Poetry and Prose of E. E. Cummings, or to

¹All quotations from Cummings' poetry are taken from E. E. Cummings, Complete Poems 1913 - 1962 (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972) - hereafter cited as CP.

limited studies of individual poems, such as Barry Marks' E. E. Cummings. The general studies are necessarily broad; the specific analyses tend to focus either on typographically interesting poems or on particularly challenging instances of Cummings' radical diction and syntax. The sonnets in themselves have attracted very little attention, although many of Cummings' best-known and critically appreciated poems are sonnets.

The criticism directed to the sonnets has been superficial or summary - a paragraph here and there. For example, Norman Friedman, perhaps Cummings' most comprehensive critic, discusses the poet's use of the sonnet in three paragraphs in The Art of his Poetry¹. And even here the comments are based on only two examples. Haskell Springer, in his article "The Poetics of E. E. Cummings," notes that the sonnets show Cummings' "desire to make the formal appear deceptively free and irregular," that although his sonnets differ "in various degrees from the sonnet of tradition, they can be recognized as containing the essence of sonnet," and that Cummings' sonnets reflect his "practice of poetry" - so much for a quarter of the poet's published verse.² Other critics are equally taciturn.

Yet a curious phenomenon exists in the criticism which is devoted

¹Norman Friedman, E. E. Cummings: The Art of his Poetry (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1960), pp. 100-103 - hereafter cited as The Art.

²Haskell S. Springer, "The Poetics of E. E. Cummings," South Atlantic Bulletin, xxxii (November, 1967), p. 8.

to Cummings' poetry, a kind of statistical imbalance in the selection by the critic of sample passages to illustrate his points about Cummings' stance as a writer. What has happened, almost universally, has been that Cummings' sonnets have been used, far beyond their numerical importance, to illustrate and define Cummings' rhetorical technique, diction, themes, and philosophy. It is only in discussing typographical innovation and visual form that the critics customarily have turned to poems other than the sonnets for illustration. For instance, Friedman's sympathetic "E. E. Cummings and the Modernist Tradition" cites eight poems by Cummings; of the eight, five are sonnets, and of the ten citations from Cummings' verse and prose, fifty percent are from sonnets.¹ One finds this tendency, if not the percentage, throughout the serious criticism. Since a writer's reputation depends on his best work, since he lives or dies as an artist by those creations which are singled out for intense and continuing critical scrutiny or which supply the critic repeatedly with significant insights into the artist's achievement, it is clear that Cummings' sonnets are a far more meaningful element of his work than has been recognized.

Chapter One of this study will treat the formal aspects of Cummings' sonnets, examining the sonnet form as he used it and relating his work to the sonnet tradition. The remaining chapters will examine the sonnets as expressions of Cummings' lebensphilosophie, his conception

¹Norman Friedman, "E. E. Cummings and the Modernist Tradition," Forum, III (1961), pp. 40-46.

of the relation of man to external nature and to the realm of transcendental reality. Chapter Two will treat the early sonnets - those found in Tulips and Chimneys, And, XLI Poems, Is 5, and Viva. Chapter Three will examine the sonnets of the middle years - No Thanks, "New Poems" of Collected Poems (1938), 50 Poems, and lxl. Chapter Four will examine the sonnets of the final phase of Cummings' career - Xaipe, 95 Poems, and 73 Poems.

In exploring the philosophical implications of the sonnets, I have tried to let the poems speak for themselves whenever possible. I have not attempted to impose upon them a pattern of philosophical growth, nor have I tried to use them to make a point to which they do not immediately address themselves.

Like all recent readers of Cummings' work, I am profoundly indebted to the formative and informative criticism of Norman Friedman, whose studies of Cummings' art and thought have become the starting point for all serious investigations of the poetry. I am also in debt to the work of J. Hillis Miller and L. S. Dembo, whose studies of the "poetry of reality" (Poets of Reality and Conceptions of Reality in Modern American Poetry respectively) have both inspired and guided my work here.

CHAPTER ONE
THE FORMAL DIMENSION

In March 1957, Cummings responded to a letter from the photographer Douglas Faulkner, thanking him for some kind praise and for a poem Faulkner had included. Cummings said that he would not call Faulkner's poem a sonnet "because for me 'sonnet' implies a poem of fourteen iambic pentameters, none of them unrhythmed."¹

For Cummings, the sonnet is defined by its rhyme scheme and meter, but his requirements are loose indeed. A sonnet's lines should rhyme - but in no set pattern; its lines should be iambic pentameters - but these could be subject to myriad variations. Cummings established no criteria for stanzaic subdivision, although he tends in practice to favor an Italianate organization; he requires neither the three quatrains - couplet scheme of the Shakespearean mode nor the octave - sestet scheme of the Petrarchan mode.² He requires no particular "logic" or progression of

¹E. E. Cummings, Selected Letters of E. E. Cummings, ed. F. W. Dupee and George Stade (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1969), p. 261.

²In a letter to Carol Poulin, Cummings says "a sonnet has 2 parts, the octave (lines 1-8) & the sestet (lines 9-14)" (Selected Letters, pp. 270-271). Since he is explaining the meaning of No Thanks #7 (CP 390), a sonnet clearly divided according to the Italian scheme, it is hard to tell if he is defining a characteristic of his form or speaking only of this sonnet. He implies a predilection for a two-part structure.

thought, nor does he limit his subject matter. As a consequence of this lack of strict definition, anything may be expected of a Cummings sonnet as long as it rhymes and has fourteen, primarily iambic pentameter lines.

Cummings' definition of the sonnet is radical. Even the most liberal sonneteers and critics of sonnets before him would have hesitated to endorse it. Charles Lamb, conservative in matters of poetic form, would have called Cummings' sonnets "quatorzains" - fourteen-line poems which approximate the sonnet but do not meet the more exacting traditional requirements of rhyme pattern, logic, and subdivision.¹ A more demanding critic, such as T. W. H. Crosland, would require absolute conformity to the Petrarchan model, and would refuse the name sonnet to any poem, including Shakespeare's sonnets, not so constructed.² More liberal writers, Leigh Hunt for instance, would accept variations of form if a genius were making them and if the variations were felicitous. Yet Hunt would bar Cummings' definition for a number of reasons, not the least being his rule that a sonnet, to be "legitimate," must follow "proper Italian fashion; that is to say, with but two rhymes in the octave, and not more than three in the sestet."³ In contrast, Sidney Lanier

¹See Tom Hood, The Rhymester: or, The Rules of Rhyme, edited, with additions, by Arthur Penn (New York: D. Appleton, 1886), p. 89.

²T. W. H. Crosland, The English Sonnet (London: Martin Secker, 1917).

³Leigh Hunt, "An Essay on the Cultivation, History, and Varieties of the Species of Poem Called the Sonnet," in The Book of the Sonnet, ed. Leigh Hunt and S. Adams Lee, Vol. I (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1867), p. 14.

argued in his Peabody Lectures that "in the English or Illegitimate sonnet there is no restriction as to the position of the rimes except that the last two lines must rime together."¹ Lanier goes so far as to quote approvingly "A Proper Sonet," from The Gorgious Gallery of Gal-lant Inventions, which contains but twelve lines.

If Cummings' definition of the sonnet form may be traced to any single influence or justified by a critical authority, that source may well be his first poetic handbook, Tom Hood's The Rhymester. Hood says: "a sonnet is a poem containing one, and only one, idea, thought, or sentiment, and consisting of fourteen lines of equal length - so much is admitted by all. There are those who consider any poem of fourteen lines a sonnet" (p. 86). Although he goes on to note that some critics require that a correct sonnet must conform to the Petrarchan model and to imply that the "Guittonian arrangement" is the highest sonnet form, he also defends the Shakespearean practice as "sanctified by genius" (p. 89).

A reader of Hunt's essay or of Crosland's book might imagine that poets who write sonnets pattern their work not only after the practice of their literary forebears but also after a scheme of abstract rules which have been long established and universally acclaimed. In sonnet criticism, the Ancients have dominated; a sonnet is what Dante or Petrarch wrote - do thou likewise or be branded "irregular," "incorrect," or "illegitimate." Historically, however, sonnets have been written in

¹Sidney Lanier, Shakespeare and his Forerunners, ed. Kemp Malone (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1945), p. 109.

various forms, and the critics have then deduced the "rules" governing their formation. There has never been an overpowering informing convention at work regarding the formal elements of sonnets. Each writer, be it Dante, Petrarch, Wyatt, Sidney, Shakespeare or Milton, has made the sonnet his own, and the critics' rules are but descriptions of the best practice, and often exercises in critical rigor or prejudice.

If one grants that sonnets have been written in forms so various as those by Shakespeare, Wordsworth et al., then one is more or less bound to assent to the proposition that any fourteen-line, rhymed poem which focuses on a single idea, thought, or feeling is a sonnet. And that is precisely the substance of Cummings' definition and practice. It is the "essence of sonnet" that counts: "economy, unity of effect,
¹
concentration and precision."

In matters of form, Cummings' practice is essentially beyond summary. It is so varied - each sonnet is so formally unique - that one can do little more than indicate the fact of variety. The two critics who have dealt in any detail with Cummings' handling of the form have recognized this, although both agree that a general tendency toward regularity developed as Cummings aged. Norman Friedman says: "in his earlier sonnets, Cummings varied the standard rhyme schemes beyond recognition, roughed up the meter, broke up the lines spatially, and ignored the standard stanzaic divisions, all in an effort to make them look as

¹Springer, p. 8.

unsonnet-like as possible. As a result, they were frequently mistaken for irregular free verse poems, and he was fond of pointing out to people who complained of his typographical 'eccentricities' that he often wrote in the sonnet form..." (The Art, p. 100). Quoting Realities XX of And (CP 149), Friedman notes that the meter is extremely irregular, that the rhyme scheme is "distorted" (i.e. neither Petrarchan nor Shakespearean), and that the "syntactical or typographical breaks" fail to match "the stanzaic divisions, such as they are..." (The Art, p. 101). In contrast, "his more mature sonnets are more regular in spacing, meter, rhyming, and dividing; but he has, by way of compensation, taken more and more to coined words and half-rhymes..." (The Art, p. 102). Friedman surmises that Cummings' early experimentation with the form of his sonnets reflects "the buoyancy of his youthful temperament as well as the general suspicion of regularity among the poets of his day" (The Art, p. 102). Cummings' later shift "reflects a changing interest in subject matter [i.e. away from the demimonde toward love and transcendence] as well as a more maturely developed set of moral values" (The Art, p. 103).

Robert L. Beloof is essentially in agreement; in his doctoral study of Cummings' prosody, Beloof says that there is "a generally applicable contrast between the early and the later sonnets, not only in typography, but also in the handling of rhyme. Perhaps a greater indirection in rhyme compensated (consciously or unconsciously) in Cummings' mind for the greater degree of formal regularity in other prosodic aspects. In any case, it is true that for the first three books there is a negligible amount of slant rhyme, and it is in those first

books that the bulk of the sonnets with highly dramatic visual elements are to be found."¹ Beloof notes as well that the rhyme schemes of Cummings' sonnets are not predictable; "few (and those in the later books) are of the regular Shakespearean or Petrarchan mold, and there occasionally occur sonnets with thorn lines in them" (p. 78).

While Beloof and Friedman are correct in saying that Cummings' early sonnets do not always look like sonnets and that they feature innovative typographical technique, their remarks are somewhat misleading because a substantial number of the sonnets in Tulips and Chimneys, And, and XLI Poems are rhymed traditionally; that is, a significant percentage (9 of 17 in Tulips and Chimneys, 8 of 45 in And, 9 of 16 in XLI Poems) follow Petrarchan, Shakespearean, or Wordsworthian octave rhyme patterns, and still more are obvious variants of the Petrarchan or Shakespearean forms (for instance, Cummings sometimes uses two alternately-rhymed quatrains with a sestet of the Italian sort. See note 2, page 6).

The thematic concerns of these traditionally-rhymed sonnets are sometimes quite unexpected, since the form is so clearly associated with the theme of ideal love. Cummings frequently plays off thematic content against the romantic implications of the form. For example, in Realities VII of And (CP 136) the romantic aura suggested by the Italian rhyme scheme (with a Miltonic enjambment of the eighth and ninth lines) ironi-

¹Robert L. Beloof, "E. E. Cummings: The Prosodic Shape of his Poems," doctoral dissertation (Northwestern University, 1954), p. 81. While neither 95 Poems nor 73 Poems had been published at the time of this study, Beloof's remarks hold true for the sonnets in these volumes.

cally counterpoints the theme of the spiritual despair generated by loveless fornication.

The traditionally-rhymed sonnets of these early volumes tend to treat "realistic" or sordid themes, while the innovatively-rhymed sonnets usually praise the beauty and purity of nature or treat transcendental themes. As Friedman says, there seems to be an element of deliberate iconoclasm in Cummings' handling of the form; he is traditional in his handling of unconventional or unexpected material and innovative in his treatment of more traditional ideas. This tendency diminished as Cummings abandoned the demimonde as a subject and as he concentrated on clarifying and defining his ideas of the way one lives transcendently in the world of time.

Both Friedman and Beloof note that the later sonnets tend to look like sonnets; a substantial percentage of the middle and late sonnets follow the Shakespearean rhyme scheme (although as Beloof points out "not all are printed in the traditional manner"), and many of them, regardless of rhyme pattern, are printed in what Beloof calls "visual stanzaic patterns" (p. 82). That is, the lines of the sonnet are grouped stanzaically according to an abstract pattern; for example, the lines of Cummings' last sonnet - #73 of 73 Poems (CP 845) - are arranged 1-3-1-3-1-4-1.

all worlds have halfsight, seeing either with
life's eye (which is if things seem spirits) or
(if spirits in the guise of things appear)
death's: any world must always half perceive.

Only whose vision can create the whole

(being forever born a foolishwise
proudhumble citizen of ecstasies
more steep than climb can time with all his years)

he's free into the beauty of the truth;

and strolls the axis of the universe
- love. Each believing world denies, whereas
your lover (looking through both life and death)
timelessly celebrates the merciful

wonder no world deny may or believe

In this poem, which has been frequently anthologized and cited as an instance of Cummings' mature art, the visual stanzaic pattern suggests by its orderliness an orderliness of thought. But there is no internal evidence to suggest that the pattern is an organic product of the thought or theme. The first line of the sonnet is set off from the three which follow and which complete the initial sentence, but nothing useful is gained by the separation. Line one ends with a preposition which gains nothing from being visually isolated (and consequently emphasized), and a profitless tension is generated by the typographical separation; that is, the syntax of the sentence carries the eye past the point of enjambment and creates a desire to discover the object of the preposition, but the typography implies that the isolated first line ought to be fully cherished before the reader continues.

The visual stanza is not often, or merely, an arbitrarily imposed pattern. Frequently the stanza is functional and acts to intensify the meaning of the isolated line or line group. The linear arrangement of #71 of 73 Poems (CP 843) is a case in point.

how many moments must (amazing each
how many centuries) these more than eyes
restroll and stroll some never deepening beach

locked in foreverish time's tide at poise

love alone understands:only for whom
i'll keep my tryst until that tide shall turn;
and from all selfsubtracting hugely doom
treasures of reeking innocence are born.

Then,with not credible the anywhere
eclipsing of a spirit's ignorance
by every wisdom knowledge fears to dare,

how the(myself's own self who's)child will dance!

and when he's plucked such mysteries as men
do not conceive-let ocean grow again

Here the isolated lines are made more significant by their isolation;
in the fourth line, the sense of the speaker's spiritual paralysis is
drawn out, while the joy and ecstasy of his release is intensified by
the isolation of line twelve.

Cummings' visual stanza seems to be the mature version of his
youthful typographical experimentation. It is less obvious and less
startling, and perhaps as painterly, but it performs the same function:
to intensify meaning by forcing the reader to attend not only to the
sense of the whole but also to the meaningfulness of the parts as they
become the whole.

Related to the technique of the visual stanza is the technique of
line-breaking, of spacing the words and phrases of a single verse verti-
cally on the page. Cummings generally employs line-breaking to accen-
tuate the significance of the words or phrases which have been typo-
graphically isolated and to govern the pace of his expression. The
line-breaks are a form of silent punctuation and force the reader to
arrest his progress slightly; they act both as unobtrusive guides to
the proper speed of reading the poems and as devices to momentarily

focus the reader's attention on a particularly meaningful element. In Actualities XII of And (CP 163), the ninth line "dribbles" down the page, suggesting the visual appearance of the wind-blown blossoms as they tumble to earth "in the woods

which
stutter
and
sing." Seldom, how-

ever, do the sonnets contain this sort of mimetic typography; they do not usually contain word-pictures on the order of Apollinaire's Calligrammes or of Cummings' own poems such as #1 of 95 Poems, where the typographical arrangement is the primary poetic element (CP 673):

l(a

le
af
fa

ll

s)
one
l

iness

More often, the line-breaks work like the one in line twelve of Realities VIII of And (CP 137):

the harsh erecting breasts and uttering tits
punish my hug
presto!

The poet's exclamation gains from its isolation.

¹
Sometimes the line-breaking creates ambiguity. For instance, line

¹For an analysis of ambiguity in Cummings' poetry, see Louis C. Rus, "Structural Ambiguity in the Poetry of E. E. Cummings," doctoral dissertation (University of Michigan, 1955).

two of Realities II of And (CP 131) is broken to emphasize the comparison of the girl to the leaf:

my strength becoming wistful in a glib
girl i consider her as a leaf thinks
of the sky, my mind takes to nib
-bling, of her posture.

Were the line printed conventionally, the reader would not apprehend the girl as a leaf, and the comparison of the speaker to the wistfully dreaming leaf would be emphasized. By breaking the line, Cummings manages to retain and accentuate the leaf-like quality of both the speaker and the girl.

Cummings' sonnets are of a piece with the rest of his work in matters of technique. While they do not spectacularly illustrate the entire range of his typographical effects, they do embody most of them. Rudolf Von Abele lists eleven specific techniques of typographical rhetoric employed by Cummings to demand the reader's ocular participation or to control the "attitudes" the reading voice must take. In addition to line-breaking and the visual stanza, and except for the use of extremely short lines, which the formal structure of the sonnet precludes, the sonnets employ "rhetorical punctuation" (CP 166), "mimetic¹ typography" (CP 163), "irregularities of line arrangement" (CP 843), "word-dismemberment" (CP 330), "word-mixing" (CP 442), the regular use of the lower-case "i" for the personal pronoun, the elimination of

¹Rudolf Von Abele, "'Only to Grow': Change in the Poetry of E. E. Cummings," *Sewanee Review*, LIX (1951), pp. 914-918.

capital letters except for rhetorical emphasis (CP 206), "typographical irony" or the use of "numerals, ampersands, equalization signs and the like where one would ordinarily expect the dignity of words" (CP 74), and "syntactic dislocation" or the "distortion of 'normal' English word-order - even beyond the distortions usually acceptable in verse..." (CP 491).

Rhetorical punctuation is used in Actualities XV of And (CP 166) to suggest the rhythmic motion of "the, negress, in the, rocker by the curb, tipping / and tipping." And in Realities I of the same volume (CP 130), the punctuation of the eleventh line, which describes the act of sexual congress, clearly indicates the spasmodic process:

my gorgeous bullet in tickling intuitive flight
aches,just,simply,into,her.

The techniques of word-mixing, word-dismemberment, and syntactic dislocation play a vital role in the success of Viva XXI (CP 330). The sonnet describes a group of drunken revelers staggering from a speakeasy at dawn. Their alcoholic confusion and spiritual illness are made vivid by the carefully disordered spelling, punctuation, and syntax:

helves surling out of eakspeasies per(reel)hapsingly
proregress heandshe-ingly people
trickle curselaughgroping shrieks bubble
squirmwrithed staggerful unstrolls collaps ingly
flash a of-faceness stuck thumblike into pie
is traffic this recalls hat gestures bud
plumptumbling hand voices Eye Doangivuh sud-
denly immense impotently Eye Doancare Eye
And How replies the upsquirtingly careens
the to collide flatfooting with Wushyuhname
a girl-flops to the Geddup curb leans
carefully spewing into her own Shush Shame

as(out from behind Nowhere)creeps the deep thing
everybody sometimes calls morning

The use of capitalization here emphasizes the trivially obscene lives of these persons and suggests as well their eye-rolling, clumsy stumbling. The clarity of the last two lines is in clear contrast to the fetid confusion of the first twelve, and as a result the purity and cleanliness of nature is implicitly contrasted with the dirty and profane world of man.

No Thanks 57 (CP 442) also successfully employs a number of techniques of typographical rhetoric, including line-breaking, word-dismemberment, word-mixing, rhetorical punctuation, and the rhetorical use of capitalization:

when
from a sidewalk
out of(blownd never quite to
-gether by large sorry)creatures out
of(clumsily shining out of)instru-
ments,waltzing;undigestibly:groans.bounce

lo-ras-ourh an-dorg-an ble-at-ssw-ee-t-noth ings orarancidhurd
ygurdygur glingth umpssomet hings(whi,le sp,arrow,s wince
among those skeletons of these trees)

when
sunbeams loot
furnished rooms through whose foul windows absurd
clouds cruise nobly ridiculous skies

(the;mselve;s a;nd scr;a;tch-ing lousy full.of.rain
beggars yaw:nstretchy:awn)

then,
o my love
,then

it's Spring
immortal Always & lewd shy New

and upon the beyond imagining spasm rise
we
you-with-me
around(me)you
IYou

The typographical arrangement of lines four through six suggests the cacophonous squealing of the handorgan, while the punctuation of lines ten and eleven exactly captures the movements of the lice-ridden beggars as they awaken to Spring. The word-mixing of "yaw:nstretchy:awn" intensifies the action described; the "yaw...awn" is stretched or extended just as the beggars' yawns are extended as they stretch and gape. By combining these three words, Cummings precisely and vividly captures the essence of this commonplace action. Furthermore, by writing "around(me)you", he creates a complex typographical irony. That is, the lady is, according to the sense of the words, surrounded by the speaker, but the typography reverses the topology of the relation by placing the "me" in the midst of the phrase "around...you." This arrangement suggests the sexual and spiritual coalescence of the lovers, but keeps them typographically and realistically discrete. This coalescence is restated by the typographical fusion of "I" and "You" into "IYou." And the capitalization emphasizes the importance of this union as well as its enlarging effect on both individuals. The line-break in the last line enhances the sense of the process by which the poet and his lady grow into "IYou."

Realities III of And (CP 132) provides an excellent instance of Cummings' clever use of typographical irony to achieve a meaningful ambiguity. Describing the act of coition, he says he feels the woman's

belly's merry thrust
Boost my huge passion like a business
and the Y her legs panting as they press
proffers its omelet of fluffy lust)

The use of the capital "Y" has two effects. It is an abbreviation for "YMCA," an organization noted for its "boosting" of traditional social and economic customs, and it is also an apt typographical representation of the woman's groin.

Both Friedman and Beloof note that Cummings' lines, particularly in the early sonnets, are frequently only loosely iambic, that his line is subject to wide variation in stress. Beloof goes so far as to assign a number of the sonnets - poems labeled sonnets by Cummings - to the category of prosodically "anomalous poems" because of their excessive irregularity (usually shortness) of line length. Cummings admitted such "variations of the typical iambic pentameter" in a letter to Beloof, but continued to consider his poems sonnets, apparently on the basis of their general iambic tendency. Actualities I of Tulips and Chimneys (CP 82) is a case in point. I have regularized the spacing of the lines to facilitate the scansion.

a thing most new complete fragile intense,
which wholly trembling memory undertakes
- your kiss, the little pushings of flesh, makes
my body sorry when the minute moon
is a remarkable splinter in the quick
of twilight....or if sunset utters one
unhurried muscled huge chromatic
fist skilfully modeling silence
- to feel how through the stopped entire day
horribly and seriously thrills
the moment of enthusiastic space

is a little wonderful, and say
Perhaps her body touched me; and to face
suddenly the lighted living hills

Seven of the lines of this sonnet are not clearly pentameter, although they read as pentameters if a medial stress is given full stress value. The real peculiarity is the presence of seven lines with eight, nine, or eleven syllables, since sonnets are usually syllabically strict. In general, the poem's meter is iambic, and the variations of meter and syllabification are not extreme; such variations of form are found, as Joseph Vogel points out in his study of Rossetti's prosody, in the work¹ of every sonnet writer. What matters is that from the first Cummings accepted such variations as compatible with the sonnet form, that he allowed for flexibility of stress and syllabification as well as for innovation in typography and syntax.

While the critics are unanimous in agreeing that there are no thematic limitations on a sonnet, that these little rooms of rhyme may be furnished however the poet chooses, the sonnet has achieved fame mainly as a love poem. Indeed, to many readers "sonnet" is synonymous with "love sonnet." The first great sonneteers - Dante and Petrarch - wrote love sonnets in praise of their ladies, immortalizing their own devotion and praising the glories of Beatrice and Laura. They also shaped, by virtue of their success, the subsequent history of the sonnet; it became the primary medium in Renaissance Europe and Elizabethan

¹Joseph F. Vogel, Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Verse-craft (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1971), p. 49.

England for the expression of personal, although frequently conventionalized, love, and it has remained an appropriate vehicle for that emotion to the present day. It is to this sonnet tradition that Cummings most belongs, and his love sonnets have been responsible for his reputation as the foremost lyric love poet of our century.

That is not to say that Cummings wrote in imitation of Petrarch, Sidney, or the other great love sonneteers. Indeed, Cummings wrote three distinct kinds of love sonnets, none of them fully traditional.

Most of the great love sonneteers addressed their poems to a Lady to whom they had committed their love. Dante sang of Beatrice, whom he loved from the instant he set eyes upon her. Petrarch sang of Laura in life and in death. And Sidney wooed "Stella" with his poems. Cummings too has a lady whose beauty and spiritual glory inspire him to song - but Cummings' lady has no name. And with the exception of certain spiritual characteristics, she is virtually unknown to the reader. We do not know if her breast is fair or dun, if her breath gently perfumes the air or reeks, whether golden or copper or black wires crown her head. Cummings' lady has no sidereal age, although she is always "young" in the sense of responding to life with the spontaneous openness of childhood.

Lu Emily Pearson notes that many critics believe that both Love and Beatrice are often highly allegorical in Dante's love sonnets.¹

¹Lu Emily Pearson, Elizabethan Love Conventions (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1933), p. 12.

Cummings' lady frequently seems so. A good example of Cummings' allegorizing treatment is found in 1x1 #19 (CP 559):

when you are silent, shining host by guest
a snowingly enfolding glory is

all angry common things to disappear
causing through mystery miracle peace:

or (if begin the colours of your voice)
from some complete existence of to dream
into complete some dream of to exist
a stranger who is i awakening am.

Living no single thing dares partly seem
one atomy once, and every cannot stir
imagining; while you are motionless -

whose moving is more april than the year
(if all her most first little flowers rise

out of tremendous darkness into air)

Here the lady is not the epitome of but is epitomized by Nature. The speaker goes beyond praising her transcendental effect on him; the lady takes dominion everywhere.¹ Her silence makes common things disappear; her voice wakes the poet from a dream-life into transcendental wakefulness; her motionlessness renders all things still.

Cummings' lady is not always so formidable; frequently she is far more human, fearing death, needing reassurance and instruction, providing companionable friendship and sexual pleasure to the poet. In 95 Poems #71 (CP 743), for example, the speaker comforts her implied

¹See Norman Friedman, e. e. cummings: The Growth of a Writer (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), p. 136 - hereafter cited as The Growth.

fears of mortality:

- how fortunate are you and i, whose home
is timelessness: we who have wandered down
from fragrant mountains of eternal now

to frolic in such mysteries as birth
and death a day (or maybe even less)

And in No Thanks #3 (CP 386), he puns on the slang phrase "die for" to
imply not only that he and the lady will find timeless union with tran-
scendence through death, but also, at least momentarily in life, through
their sexual joy. Often Cummings will instruct his lady in the nature
of Nature and in how to live transcendently in time. Such sonnets are
a reflection of his maturing understanding of life and occur in the
middle and late periods of his career. 95 Poems #78 (CP 750) is a good
example of Cummings' interpreting life for his beloved.

all nearness pauses, while a star can grow

all distance breathes a final dream of bells;
perfectly outlined against afterglow
are all amazing the and peaceful hills

(not where not here but neither's blue most both)

and history immeasurably is
wealthier by a single sweet day's death:
as not imagined secrecies comprise

goldenly huge whole the upfloating moon.

Time's a strange fellow;

more he gives than takes
(and he takes all) nor any marvel finds
quite disappearance but some keener makes
losing, gaining

-lovelif a world ends

more than all worlds begin to (see?) begin

scendental "actuality," but encountered only spiritual enervation in his day-to-day "real" existence. In his later sonnets, the lady remains the poet's muse, but she also becomes increasingly human; Cummings ceases writing about loveless fornication but does invest his true lady with fear and desire, and so combines the two early views of woman into a more mature, less unrealistic synthesis. 73 Poems #37 (CP 809) reflects this fusion; here the speaker tutors his lady in the nature of Nature, but still finds through her kiss the transcendental life which subsumes "hugest whole creation":

now that, more nearest even than your fate

and mine (or any truth beyond perceive)
quivers this miracle of summer night

her trillion secrets touchably alive

-while and all mysteries which i or you
(blinded by merely things believable)
could only fancy we should never know

are unimaginably ours to feel -

how should some world (we marvel) doubt, for just
sweet terrifying the particular
moment it takes one very falling most
(there: did you see it?) star to disappear,

that hugest whole creation may be less
incalculable than a single kiss

The third kind of love sonnet that Cummings wrote praises Love as the "axis of the universe" (73 Poems #73, CP 845). Although they are sometimes intended to instruct his lady, such sonnets are usually detached from a particular event or moment. Perhaps the best-known of these sonnets is 95 Poems #94 (CP 768):

being to timelessness as it's to time,

love did no more begin than love will end;
where nothing is to breathe to stroll to swim
love is the air the ocean and the land

(do lovers suffer?all divinities
proudly descending put on deathful flesh:
are lovers glad?only their smallest joy's
a universe emerging from a wish)

love is the voice under all silences,
the hope which has no opposite in fear;
the strength so strong mere force is feebleness:
the truth more first than sun more last than star

-do lovers love?why then to heaven with hell.
Whatever sages say and fools,all's well

Sentiments such as these clearly link Cummings to Rossetti and Dante;
his treatment of love in what amounts to Platonic terms is particularly
reminiscent of Rossetti's sonnet "Through Death to Love" and of Dante's
general conception of love in La Vita Nuova (Realities VI of Tulips and
Chimneys, CP 75, seems a clear parody of Dante's apostrophes to Love).

Cummings does not write "conceited" or conventionally metaphorized
sonnets. A few of his poems apologize to his lady for his inevitable
failure to capture her beauty in his verse (Is 5, Five V, CP 306) or
promise her literary immortality (Tulips and Chimneys, Actualities II,
CP 83), but he does not employ received conventions of diction or im-
agery. He rarely addresses his lady as anything but a lady, and his
favorite metaphors for her power over him are drawn, quite without
"wit," from the natural world: she is rain to his parched earth, snow
bringing peaceful oblivion to his troubled world, spring bringing him
to life after dormancy. The only traditional conceit I have found in
the sonnets is in Actualities V of And (CP 156), where Cummings de-
scribes Spring, not his lady, as a "galleon" which brings spiritual

rebirth to him as well as vegetative rebirth to Nature. Cummings' avoidance of conceits reflects his general attitude toward life; that is, he stresses throughout his writings the moral obligation of every individual to test the truth and usefulness of all received ideologies, concepts, or systems, and he refuses to be enslaved by another's.

Cummings wrote only one sonnet sequence, and that - entitled "Five Americans" in Is 5 - is a portrait gallery of five prostitutes. The love sonnets do not comprise a sequence. The poet's lady is unnamed, and for the large part his conception of her is only selectively, perhaps vaguely, developed. One cannot even be sure that Cummings has a lady, that his lady is always the same; his biography reveals no Beatrice (he had three wives, and his sonnets imply a number of youthful affairs), and one can even argue that the lady-as transcendental-power differs from the lady-as-mistress. Cummings' sonnets may suggest the unity of a madrigal, but they are truly monuments to moments of¹ love.

In the final analysis, Cummings' use of the sonnet form is eclectic. Without being slavishly imitative, he drew upon the sonnet literature of the past, employing those elements which furthered his immediate creative aims and ignoring those which restricted them. One characteristic is obvious: Cummings refused to be bound by conventions created by preceding sonneteers. Just as he refused to submit to

¹I am indebted to Professor Michael O'Neill for this suggestion.

established conventions of typographical arrangement, syntax, and punctuation, so he refused to accept the necessity of writing after the manner of Petrarch, or Shakespeare, or Rossetti. Cummings' handling of the form indicates not only his awareness of his participation in a tradition but also reflects his basic artistic stance, his belief that the artist must be true to his own creative impulse and must refuse to submit mindlessly to the aesthetic dictates of others.

CHAPTER TWO
THE EARLY SONNETS

Cummings' early sonnets are found in five volumes: Tulips and Chimneys (1923), And (1925), XLI Poems (1925), Is 5 (1926), and Viva (1931). Nearly all of the sonnets in the first four volumes were written before 1923 and were originally contained in the manuscript version of Tulips and Chimneys which Cummings' friend Stewart Mitchell submitted to the publisher Thomas Selzer in 1922 while the poet was abroad. Selzer reduced substantially the number of poems in his printed edition of Tulips and Chimneys, but the omitted poems were later included in And, XLI Poems, and Is 5.¹ The sonnets in these four volumes include some that were originally published separately (in such places as The Dial) as well as those appearing in Cummings' part of Eight Harvard Poets. Since most are undatable, I have treated this group of sonnets as contemporaneous. And while the sonnets of Viva may be considered transitional poems, I treat them in this chapter because they mark the close of roughly the first third of Cummings' life as a professional writer, because they reflect the general attitude toward life that is found in the earlier volumes yet imply that his thought is evolving, and because the

¹See Charles Norman, The Magic Maker: E. E. Cummings (New York: Macmillan, 1958), p. 173. The standard bibliography of Cummings' work is George J. Firmage, E. E. Cummings: A Bibliography (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1960).

sonnets of Cummings' sixth volume - No Thanks (1935) - reflect a significant advance in his lebensphilosophie.¹ In Cummings' first three volumes, the sonnets are explicitly set off from his other poems and labelled sonnets. In Tulips and Chimneys, the poems are divided into two groups, "Tulips" and "Chimneys"; the sonnets comprise the "Chimneys." Friedman suggests that the sonnets are called Chimneys because they are "fixed" or "artificial structures," while most of the "Tulips" are free verse poems (The Growth, p. 38). Following the pattern established in the first volume, the sonnets of both And and XLI Poems are the final poems in the volume, and they too are clearly labelled sonnets, while the other poems are grouped as "post impressions," "portraits," "songs," or are merely collected in numbered groups.

The sonnet-groups of the two earliest volumes are further subdivided according to theme. In Tulips and Chimneys, the sonnets are classified as "Realities," "Unrealities," or "Actualities." Friedman notes that the "Realities" sonnets "deal primarily with sexual love and the demimonde" in a "mixed and violent" style, while the "Unrealities" treat "romantic love...and the world of nature's seasons, the night, the sea, death, and time" in a less experimental style (The Growth, pp. 41-42). He also says that the "Actualities" sonnets "combine a treatment of ideal and sexual love, the seasons, places, time of day, dream, and death. Their style is tender, paradoxical, whimsical, and more experimental than

¹Although I classify the sonnets of Viva as "early," I do not mean to imply a radical break in the fabric of Cummings' thought; a good argument can be made that Viva belongs to the middle period on the basis of its structure and the distribution of the sonnets in the volume.

in the other two groups" (p. 42). The distinction between the "Unrealities" and "Actualities" is not exact; the sonnets of "Unrealities" blend the sexual interest of the "Realities" poems with the transcendental concerns of the "Actualities," but they are far more like the latter than the former.

Cummings eliminates the category of "Unrealities" in And, classifying the sonnets as "Realities" and "Actualities" only. The "Realities" sonnets here, without exception, treat the demimonde of thugs and prostitutes, and the spiritual effects of theroid sexuality. The "Actualities" sonnets are devoted to praise of the poet's lady, to celebrations of scenes of nature, to the treatment of love, death's meaning, and the way to conduct one's life to gain transcendence.

The subdivision of the sonnets is dropped altogether in XLI Poems, although the sonnets are still set off from the other poems, perhaps because they do not naturally divide into two thematic groups. The demimonde ceases to be a topic; in fact, one senses that the sonnets here, with the exception of the last, are leftovers which were somehow unsuitable for inclusion in And. That is, several of the sonnets were very early productions originally printed in Eight Harvard Poets, and many of the sonnets seem to reflect the dreamy romanticism that characterizes the poet's earliest work.

Cummings uses his sonnets to "frame" the contents of Is 5. This collection begins and ends with groups of five sonnets. The initial group satirically describes "Five Americans," all prostitutes in a brothel, while the last five treat transcendence and love. The pattern of

beginning with sonnets treating sordid "reality" and closing with hymns to transcendental "actuality" which was begun in Tulips and Chimneys is continued in this volume although the sonnets are not all together or even labelled sonnets.

Unlike those of earlier volumes, the sonnets of Viva are not separated from the other poems; instead, Cummings finds a new way of using them to organize the volume. In Viva, every seventh poem is a sonnet, and the volume concludes with a group of seven sonnets. The general pattern of movement from mundane to transcendental themes is maintained, however, as it will be in later volumes until Cummings loses interest in the demimonde, and the general moral condition of mostpeople, to concentrate on his own spiritual condition.

The classification of the early sonnets into two general categories, and the pattern of thematic movement in the sonnets, reflects a profound dichotomy in Cummings' early conception of existence; being is divided into two general realms: a "fallen" phenomenal state or "unworld" and a transcendental noumenon or world of "dream." Mostpeople or the mass of mankind live in a "world of made" - a world of created objects and abstract systems of thought and perception; modern man is alienated from both Nature (the world is too much with mostpeople) and the noumenal world because of his corrupt conceptions and treatment of life and himself. Man fears death, repudiates "mystery," distrusts emotion while exalting reason, and thinks himself "lord of creation." But as a self-proclaimed Platonist, Cummings also posits a higher spiritual realm of timeless perfection, a world of dream, mystery, and imagination in which all things are perfectly unified and harmonious yet ever-growing. This

realm of original, indescribable wholeness subsumes the phenomenal yet is felt to be ineffably beyond it. Only through love and through uncorrupted Nature can one apprehend the essential qualities of the transcendental condition; love between man and woman is seen as an earthly analogue to the spiritual unity of transcendence, while Nature's processes mirror the harmonious operations of the transcendental realm.

Cummings' attitude toward the nature of death is ambiguous in the early sonnets; death is seen and feared as the cessation of being in the sonnets which deal with brute sexuality, but it is also apprehended as a gateway to transcendental life in many of the "Actualities." Sexual activity is both dispiriting (when it is loveless and egotistical) and an earthly counterpart of transcendently loving union (when it is shared selflessness and giving).

The two realms of existence are implicit in Cummings' first published sonnet, the famous description of "the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls" (CP 70). These complacent women, living in a received world, are cut off from nature and wholesome intercourse with life outside their minuscule circle; they "do not care" about anything outside themselves. Even their charitable activities arise from selfish motives.

The speaker's image of the moon, rattling like a "fragment of angry candy" in its "box of sky" implies Cummings' apprehension of a greater existence beyond the ladies' comprehension. The surrealistic imagery is, of course, intended to contrast with their stuffy complacency, but it is also meant to suggest that the larger world of nature is dynamically alive. The fancifulness of the image, and the imputation that the

moon is angry at its neglect, implies it is essentially beyond the framing imagination of man, and reminds us that the poet is as yet very young; he is still a petulant rebel, angry at his elders' blindness. Moreover, merely the fact of an independent, higher existence is manifest; its quality or nature is largely undeveloped.¹

Cummings' openness to nature, and through nature to the noumenal world, is made explicit in a later sonnet of Tulips and Chimneys, Un-realities IV (CP 79). Here the speaker addresses the "tremendous" flower of the night, whose "petals" or stars "torture" his spirit "with the exquisite froms and whithers of existence." Comparing himself to an "un-speaking watcher who adores/perceived sails whose mighty brightness dumbs/ the utterance of the soul," the speaker feels "the delicious smart/of thrilled ecstasy" as he detects "the white ship" of night's heart - the moon - "on frailer ports of costlier commerce bent."

Here too the moon is a symbol - now of a realm of romantic adventure and sensual ecstasy. And again the nature of this realm is essentially indefinite. The sonnet simply records the speaker's rather fanciful apprehension of the existence of "frailer ports of costlier commerce" somewhere beyond the sky.

Unrealities VI (CP 81) celebrates a night whose "temporal splendor" contains a "connotation of infinity." It is on such a night as this

when souls which have forgot frivolity

¹Cf. Friedman, The Growth, p. 44.

in lowliness, noting the fatal flight
of worlds whereto this earth's a hurled dream

down eager avenues of lifelessness

consider for how much themselves shall gleam,
in the poised radiance of perpetualness.
When what's in velvet beyond doomed thought

is like a woman amorous to be known;
and man, whose here is always worse than naught,
feels the tremendous yonder for his own.

Here the poet's ideas about the nature of "infinity" are more explicit. It is a realm of radiance and perpetualness, and it is beyond the power of thought or analytic ratiocination to measure or classify. It is like a woman amorous to be known, and like a woman, the natural object of man's aspirations. It is, as Cummings will say later in Actualities IV of And, the world of "dream."

Cummings also finds the promise of a transcendental realm in the cyclical processes of nature. For instance, in Unrealities V of Tulips and Chimneys (CP 80), the speaker is in a state of spiritual dejection. "A wind" has blown away the rain, sky, and all the leaves; only the bare trees remain. The speaker, who feels he has "known autumn too long," calls on death to finish the job and bring "doom's integration" to all things, including himself. Unable to bear his loss of "summer" longer, he seeks oblivion. Yet even as he calls on death, he senses it will bring not only an end but also a beginning; he sees that the trees "suddenly wait against the moon's face."

The implication of rebirth is, of course, inherent in the natural imagery Cummings employs here. Because the seasons, the trees, and the moon are elements in cyclic processes, their use implies the world of the

poem is also cyclical, and that rebirth is also in the nature of things.

That does not mean in itself that rebirth into transcendence is inherent in dying. However, this idea is implicit in several other of the early sonnets. In Actualities XVII of And (CP 168), the "murdering coolness" of falling snow at dusk brings the "radiance" of transcendence and frees the world to "dream." Night and winter combine to bring "peace" and "ecstasy" to the city of man. In Actualities VII (CP 158), the speaker becomes "quietly amorous...of death's big rotten particular kiss" because he has discovered the virtues of autumnal destruction. He discovers reflected in a portrait of Goethe belonging to a friend the knowledge that the world of dream is attainable through death.

That is not to say, however, that the early sonnets are unanimous on this point. Cummings finds death, even as it promises rebirth, "hideous" because it entails the destruction of natural beauty. And, more often than not, death remains a feared phenomenon which signifies absolute dissolution of soul and self.

In Unrealities II (CP 77), Cummings personifies the sea and the land as sexually infatuated lovers and their interaction as a kind of coition. Even while the sea "gloats" upon the "stunning flesh" of his mistress, and her hunger "leaves his smile wan," he discovers and is terrified by the awareness that his continuing exploration of "her green body" is "hideous work," for it means her destruction and the "freeing of ghostly chaos."

Cummings is not only saying that love can bring about its own loss but also symbolizing the idea - a particularly modern idea - that the processes of nature are entropic: the phenomenal world is inherently

self-destructive. Even when they are at their most harmonious - when they are in "love" - the elements of nature are "battening" on one another, reducing themselves to chaos.

In Actualities II (CP 83), the poet assures his lady that her smile will hang "breathless" in his art, even though she will be harvested by "Farmer Death." Likewise, the speaker in Actualities II of And (CP 153) assumes his lady's mortality. And in Actualities IX (CP 160) the speaker urges his lover to "live suddenly without thinking" for he is oppressed by his intuition that death and chaos are imminent and unavoidable: "Whirl's after all."

In the following sonnet, Actualities X (CP 161), which might aptly be entitled "Memento Mori," Cummings urges his lady to "get another man with firmer lips" if he should leave her to "sleep with a lady called death." In spite of his apparent unselfishness, he seems disturbed by his lady's thoughtless pleasure-seeking. Pretending to speak from beyond the grave, and imagining that he is observing "how the limp huddling string" of her smile "squirms kissingly" over her new lover's body, the poet promises to bring her "every spring/handfuls of little normal worms." He also says he understands why her new lover will laugh at the lady's careful attempts to beautify and preserve herself, and he promises to bring her "something which is worth the whole" of her efforts at preservation: "an inch of nothing for her soul."¹ He knows

¹Charles E. Stetler, "A Study of the Transcendental Poetry of E. E. Cummings," doctoral dissertation (Tulane University, 1966), pp. 13-14, rightly finds an obscene pun on "whole." Cummings clearly wants to link the lady's pleasure-seeking with sexuality, and sexuality with mortality.

that she is inclined to ignore the unpleasant, or to seek refuge from it in physical pleasure, so he reminds her that she too must die. Wise in his knowledge of life and death, he promises her a gift for her soul's health - a salutary draught of nothingness to prepare her, like Mithridates, for the greater oblivion to come.

Death is again assumed to be final in the eleventh sonnet of XLI Poems (CP 215). Here Cummings assures his lady that he loves her and will be with her as they both face death's scythe. And in Sonnet XIV (CP 218), Cummings despairingly wonders if spring and rebirth will ever come,

or will the fleshless moments go and go
across the dirtied pane where softly preys
the grey and perpendicular Always.

There is a curiously puritanical relationship between the oblivion of death and loveless sexual activity in these early sonnets. That is, Cummings frequently implies that sexual congress is the path to absolute spiritual inanition. In a number of the sonnets, the speaker discovers death's reality through engaging in loveless intercourse; his post-coital depression is often the occasion of dispiriting insight.

The most conspicuous examples of the deathful effects of lust are found in the poems describing prostitutes. For instance, Realities V of Tulips and Chimneys (CP 74) portrays "Kitty," a sixteen year-old whore "whose slippery body is Death's littlest pal." Helped by "clever drolls" who ply her with liquor, Kitty has come to the oldest profession because she refuses to meet life honestly, to be responsible for herself and responsive to others; she avoids "always the touch of must and shall." Kitty, like all prostitutes, reduces her relations to men to a matter of

her own profit; the unspontaneous "quick softness" of the sex she retails is the antithesis of sincere sexual love, and is therefore the avenue to death. Kitty is death's pal because she seduces men into thinking that life is a matter of mere commerce.

Like Kitty, the "irreproachable ladies" of Realities IX of And (CP 138), inmates of a house of prostitution, are "ladies with whom time/feeds especially his immense lips" and "on whose deep nakedness death most believes" because they sell themselves lovelessly in an attempt to defy time and remain perpetually girls. They too scatter the "pink propaganda of annihilation" by reducing human relations to commercial transactions.

In Realities I of And (CP 130), the speaker celebrates the pleasures of copulation. Yet even as he delights in "supreme sex," he betrays an awareness of decay and death that implies his sexual behavior is predicated on fear. Cummings implies here that there is something corrupt and ephemeral about sex; fornication is "riant," but it is also "slipshod" and "fooling" and something like "hell." Even as his "gorgeous bullet in tickling intuitive flight" plunges into his mistress, the speaker, like Andrew Marvell in "To His Coy Mistress," is aware of the imminence of "worms." Moreover, in describing sex as a "summer" activity, Cummings suggests that sex becomes for some a momentary escape or refuge from death.

Realities III (CP 132) returns to this theme, portraying the dispiriting effects of simple fornication. In bed with his mistress again, the speaker is spiritually depressed by the sordidness of his current sexual encounter; his "seeing blood" is "throttled" by the

"dirty colours of her kiss." Moreover, the message is repeated in the following sonnet (CP 133), where the speaker's sadness contrasts strongly with the professional satisfaction of his French whore; although she murmurs her delight at his performance and assures him that they are "heureux" (happy and successful), he wants to die, feeling his "soul a limp lump of lymph."

In Realities VII (CP 136), the speaker momentarily finds - as "well/fused flesh does surely to mesh" - escape from the terrors of death and decay through intercourse with his mistress. But his sexual delight is soon replaced by a clear and immediate awareness of his own certain mortality; he now hears "in darkness, water the lips of death." The speaker's lady is also seeking a stay against mortality in sex; in Realities XVIII (CP 147), Cummings explains why his girl, when they go to bed, "begins to heave and twine" about him and to kiss his face and head. Although she is "hard," she is "just like a vine/that's spent all of its life on a garden wall/and is going to die." Passion is her mode of escape; she tries to find stability and safety by clinging to the speaker, but he knows that like a vine she will die. He also knows sex is only a temporary refuge from the icy winter winds of death.

Sometimes the poet is defiant of death and finds sexual activity a brave gesture. Even though he and his lady may be "lost bodies" inevitably doomed, they have the illusion, in their "futile lovemaking," of controlling their mutual "death," i.e. petit mort or sexual climax (CP 214). On another occasion, he says they can get a "bulge" on death through their lovemaking (CP 84).

By my count, a little less than a third of the early sonnets (28 of 89) deal with the demimonde and with dispiriting, essentially erotic sexual encounters. Cummings seems to have been unusually interested in the world of whores, madams, and crooks. Frequently his speaker is presented as being involved, either as a customer or as a participant. The world view implied in these sonnets is sombre - fearful, despairing, hopeless; it is a world of disease and physical corruption - a place where all relationships are commercial, egocentric, and loveless.

Is 5 begins with a series of five sonnets entitled "Five Americans." The ladies described in these poems are whores, apparently all inmates of a house of prostitution.¹ I infer from the title "Five Americans" that Cummings may have intended these women to be representative Americans.

Certainly "Liz," the subject of the opening poem (CP 225), seems to embody a version of the American Dream. She complains that "business is rotten," but doesn't really care; she is supremely bored with her life. Yet the speaker detects in her an imaginative life that belies her idle toe-tapping and bored yawns. Although "no one knows" what Liz thinks of, the speaker suggests that it would be appropriate

if it were a kiss)
distinct entirely melting sinuous lean ...
whereof this lady in some book had read.

¹The brothel may be owned by "Dick Mid," who is described in Realities XX of And (CP 149), and the madam who welcomes "smeestair steevun-sun" in Realities IV of Tulips and Chimneys (CP 73) may operate it.

As a consequence of the speaker's conjecture, the poem vibrates between two poles - the image we have of Liz and the implications of her Romantic medievalism. The first contrast is that between Liz's physical grossness (she is ponderously thick) and her sinuous lean dream. A second polarity is temporal; the sleazy, corrupt present is set against the "noble, chivalrous" past. A third contrast is between the living and the read; the grossness and corruption of living flesh is countered by the perfect beauty of art.

Liz seems to embody the American Dream as Cummings sees it at this time. She markets her wares in order to attain her ideal life, believing in the received myth that through industry and perseverance she will find that lean and sinuous romance she dreams of. Cummings implies that Liz's dream is founded on a lie, on the fantasies of "some book." And because her Romantic dream has led her into a corrupt, self-destructive life, we may infer that Cummings thinks the same of the lives of Americans in general.

The double nature - the attractiveness and corruption - of modern life is also suggested in the second sonnet (CP 226). "Mame" is a whore with a tooth of gold. Proud of her endurance, she tilts back her head to show the speaker a new gold crown on a wisdom tooth, bragging that she had the work done without anaesthesia. The speaker looks, but ceases to breathe. Mame is not unattractive; her bragging is done with good nature. But she is as corrupt as her breath and teeth, and she reminds us of another famous diseased whore - the poule Georgette in The Sun Also Rises. Mame is a jolly soul until she opens her mouth and betrays a physical corruption commensurate with her moral dis-ease.

The third sonnet (CP 227) tries to portray "Gert," for whom the speaker can find no "sharpest neat word." Gert is a gruesome-voiced "trull" who loves "uh swell fite" and who has a "tall corpsecoloured body." But while Gert is little more than a mindless hedonist, Marj, who is featured in the fourth sonnet (CP 228), is a naive philosopher who believes, or claims to believe, that life is a dream and that everyone is really "asleep." Unlike Wordsworth, Marj finds no intimations of immortality or of any sort of awakening. She dismisses "Gawd" as a "damn gink" and finds the madam of her brothel a far more real power in her life than He.

Marj's remarks may not be meant seriously. She takes a feline pleasure from toying with the speaker's "illusions," and her raucous laughter and "permanent" smile impute a degree of facetiousness to her philosophy.¹ Although we cannot know how sincere Marj is, one senses she is putting up a comic front and that she is profoundly afraid of reality. She may be hiding from the plain facts of her existence, and despair, by calling life a dream and laughing at it.

In the final sonnet of "Five Americans" (CP 229), Cummings reflects on the "brittle whore" Fran, who is a curious mixture of attractiveness and danger. Fran is sexually exciting, but "her tiniest whispered invitation/is like a clock striking in a dark house." The speaker knows she is corrupt and is to be avoided; he knows that if he should ask God

¹Barry Marks, E. E. Cummings (New Haven: College & University Press, 1964), p. 80, says Marj's strength is her unwillingness to take either the world or herself seriously.

about Fran, God would tell him to "go in peace" and to "always try/ to not wonder" about her. Yet he is unable to do that; even as he is being told to shun the Frans and the questions about them, he is thinking about them. He knows her invitation is a call to eternal death, but he is attracted nevertheless.

While this poem clearly refers to the attractiveness of sin, it may also refer to the American Dream, and to phenomenal life in general. Cummings may be saying that life is a mixture of ecstasy and corruption, and that it is not easy to escape its lures. The dream is an illusion, then, which leads man into moral suicide.

In a number of these sonnets, Cummings' speaker is engaging in coition and describing his responses. Almost without exception, he both enjoys and is disgusted by his actions. I noted earlier that these encounters sometimes end with the speaker's apprehension of death as a finality. Frequently they are felt to be sordid and disgusting throughout. A good example of such sonnets is Realities VI of And (CP 134):

the poem her belly marched through me as
one army. From her nostrils to her feet

she smelled of silence. The inspired cleat

of her glad leg pulled into a sole mass
my separate lusts

her hair was like a gas
evil to feel. Unwieldy

the bloodbeat
in her fierce laziness tried to repeat
a trick of syncopation Europe has

. One day i felt a mountain touch me where
I stood(maybe nine miles off). It was spring

sun-stirring, sweetly to the mangling air
muchness of buds mattered. a valley spilled
its tickling river in my eyes,
the killed

world wriggled like a twitched string.

In contrast to the inspiring effect of nature, which seems to vivify
"the killed world," the woman is a murderous army of occupation. There
is no joy in their encounter, only a kind of silent, selfish war in a
bed. Realities III of And (CP 132) presents another instance of sordid
sexuality. There is nothing elevating or redeeming here:

the dirty colours of her kiss have just
throttled
my seeing blood, her heart's chatter

riveted a weeping skyscraper

in me

i bite on the eyes' brittle crust
(only feeling the belly's merry thrust
Boost my huge passion like a business

and the Y her legs panting as they press

proffers its omelet of fluffy lust)
at six exactly
the alarm tore

two slits in her cheeks. A brain peered at the dawn.
she got up

with a gashing yellow yawn
and tottered to a glass bumping things.
she picked wearily something from the floor

Her hair was mussed, and she coughed while tying strings

Sexuality, however, is not always spiritually destructive. When it is
associated with sincere love, it is frequently the avenue which leads
the poet to a new vision of nature and of the transcendent.

Actualities I of Tulips and Chimneys (CP 82) describes the revolutionary effect of the speaker's lady's kiss. "A thing most new complete fragile intense," it makes the speaker's life in the phenomenal world of space and time meaningful for the first time by magically bringing the world alive for him. Where before phenomenal life was "worse than naught," now, as a result of these "little pushings of flesh," the speaker's body is "sorry when the minute moon/is a remarkable splinter in the quick of twilight." That is, the world of day has become "a little wonderful" through her kiss, and the speaker more responsive to his earthly life; he now faces "lighted living hills."

Similarly, Actualities I of And (CP 152) praises the speaker's lady by reflecting on her power to make him "something suddenly luminous and precise." Not only does she bring sensual beauty ("music," "curving colour," "a wonderful smell") into his life, but also radical spiritual transformation; her beauty "murders" the speaker in order to bring to birth a new entity, which is the union of the speaker and his lady: from "I" and "she" comes "we." The poem concludes with the intimation that the lady, and transformation, are imminent once again.

Actualities IV (CP 155) is more explicit about sex. Stimulated by the beauty of the dusk, and by his awareness that night is about to fall, the speaker tells his lady that this night they will "trace" the

¹Julia P. Stanley, "An Analysis of E. E. Cummings' 'Actualities: I'," College Composition and Communication, XVII (1966), pp. 130-134, offers an interesting but inconclusive transformational analysis of this sonnet.

"alert willing myth of body" until the "final silence." Like many of the early sonnets, this poem suggests that sexual desire is a function of one's awareness of death. However, the speaker implies here that there is a state beyond the body wherein nature exists in the unity suggested by sexual conjunction, and that through sex they can become a part of that harmony. Similarly, Actualities VI (CP 157) explains how, in moments of sexual release, the speaker not only feels that "the fooling world" swims beautifully in his "blood," but also that "his chattering self perceives with hysterical fright" that he is "a comic tadpole wriggling in delicious mud." Even as he embraces the physical life in the person of his lady - perhaps even because he embraces it - he discovers that his existence in the phenomenal world is an immature state, a larval form of being as it were, and implies that humans, like tadpoles, can outgrow the delicious mud of phenomenal life.

The sonnets of XLI Poems also begin with a love poem (CP 205) which praises the speaker's lady. Here the poet tells her that his life centers on her, and that if she were to spend "the cold perfect night" with him, at dawn his life would be transfigured and the world rendered a possibly unbearable "marvel." The poem is not only an invitation to carnal delights; this is a cold perfect night of spiritual love, and it is the poet's soul that finds rapture. If this night of love were to occur, not only the speaker's life but also the phenomenal world would be transformed; hitherto a fallen world of "frailties of dimension," the world would become for him a strangely exciting place where "birds known, scarcely" "begin to sing."

Sonnet IX of XLI Poems (CP 213) asks the lady to come to the speaker when "the small spiritual cry of spring/utters a striving flower" to draw him from his "sleep" or half-life in the world of vilest "mind" and "thoughtful war." Her love frees him from the illusion that he is subject to time. And because they are timeless through their love, he and the lady can love the evanescent beauty of the purple roses more than those who themselves come within time's bending sickle's compass.

The lady does not have to be present for her transforming power to work its magic on the speaker. In Actualities XIV of And (CP 165), for instance, the speaker rhetorically addresses his absent lady, for whom he is grieving and faint, asking that his memory ("the ivory performing rose") of her, which has been in his dreams all night, remain with him in the "unkind dawn." Only her memory "pricks with minute odour" the "gross days" of his "unlife" without her, and he desires to keep it "until/with neat obscure obvious hands/Time stuff the sincere stomach of each mill/of the ingenious gods" who have stolen her away. That is, he wants her memory to remain eternally. In Actualities XVIII (CP 165), she is described, though absent, as his "accurate key" to the "palace" of transcendence.

Patricia B. T. Cline has pointed out that Cummings' view of love and sexuality is essentially Platonic: "the beast with two backs from Plato's dissertation of love, halved into male and female by Zeus, in

his infinite wit, is a serious metaphor in Cummings' love poems."¹
This is particularly true with respect to the love sonnets addressed to the poet's lady; sexual contact is the analogue in the fallen world to noumenal unity, and consequently one avenue to the apprehension of the existence of that state for those existing in the unworld.

Two sonnets describe the speaker's expectations as a result of the love of his lady. In Actualities V of Tulips and Chimneys (CP 86), the final poem of that volume, Cummings adumbrates the details of an evening walk he intends to take with his ladylove. On this moonlit night, they will "choose the way to the forest," following a "houseless wisping rune/of road" by fields filled with the "microscopic withering" of the "Black People" until they "pass the simple ugliness/of exact tombs, where a large road crosses/and all the people are minutely dead." Only then will she "slowly kiss" him.

It seems clear that theirs is to be a journey symbolic of the course and pattern of their lives. They will have a natural life, independent of the "white town" of human society. Sharpened by their contact with nature, they will be at one with the teeming life in the fields and unafraid of the chthonic forces of creation (the Black People). As a result of their love, they will pass or transcend death, finding the beginning of their fulfillment in the forests of the night.

In the very similar sonnet "Five" II of Is 5 (CP 303), the speaker, liberated from the limitations of the diurnal by his lady's touch and

¹Patricia B. T. Cline, "The Whole E. E. Cummings," E. E. Cummings: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Norman Friedman (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 62.

the spring night, invites her to "go a very little beyond/the last road" with him. But the lady hesitates, afraid because "everything turns into something else and slips away." She fears external reality, which becomes dream-like when it is freed from the usual conventions of the phenomenal world. The poet, rather protectively, tries to calm her fears by asserting his shaping, metaphorical imagination; he says the moon is like "a big yellow dog" following them through the night. But even as he tries to frame externality, it evades his metaphors, becoming first "a big red dog that may be owned by who knows," then simply itself - the moon, something "faithful and mad." Like a mad dog, reality is uncontrollable by the human mind, or at best is controllable only by those who "know" as a consequence of their transcendence; reality is - and the mind can only distort, canalize, or pattern it temporarily. It is, however, "faithful" and ever-present to the lovers.

It is interesting to note that while the lady is to the poet's spirit as the spring rain is to parched fields (CP 163), the lady herself does not necessarily know of transcendence. In the last two poems, the speaker assumes a tutorial pose, instructing her in the nature of things.

Norman Friedman has pointed out that Cummings' satirical vision is only lightly represented in the very early volumes, and becomes apparent only in Is 5, where roughly a fifth to a third of the poems are satirical (The Growth, p. 48). The sonnets reflect this proportion.

Typical of Cummings' early satirical efforts is Realities XIII of And (CP 142), which addresses a whore who has been allowed to freeze to death on the morning of Christmas Eve, and which satirizes the Christmas

season as a spiritually empty commercial enterprise. Cummings also attacks sexual hypocrisy in Realities XVII (CP 146). But perhaps his best-known satirical sonnet, other than "the Cambridge ladies," is "next to of course god america i" (CP 268), the widely-anthologized portrait of a jingoistic super-patriot.

A case can be made for the view that Cummings' poems in general contain satirical elements. Certainly the sonnets frequently imply a comparison of what is with what ought to be. However, the general thrust of most of the early sonnets is not satirical, and straightforward satires do not become frequent until Cummings' middle period.

The infrequency of explicit satire in the early sonnets implies that Cummings had not arrived at a firm moral, political, or social position. This indecisiveness is also reflected, I believe, in his curiously sympathetic attitude toward the inhabitants of the demimonde. Although he recognizes their moral decay, he is fascinated by them, and he places himself among them as a participant and co-conspirator in the general folly. His moral ambivalence is matched by a philosophical vagueness; one senses that he is groping in the early sonnets toward a unified view of life, death, and transcendence, yet his vacillations clearly indicate that he has not yet achieved it.

Viva, Cummings' fifth volume of verse, is structured by the arrangement of its sonnets. Every seventh poem is a sonnet, and the volume ends with seven sonnets. These poems taken together act as an ideational spine from which the whole volume depends. Moreover, the more-or-less familiar sonnet form provides a kind of traditional foundation for the reader, a base from which he can safely explore the less traditional poems.

In a letter to Francis Steegmuller in 1959, Cummings noted: "all of my booksofpoems after the original T&C manuscript - published as Tulips and Chimneys, AND, XLI Poems - start with autumn (downgoing, despair) & pass through winter (mystery, dream) & stop in spring (upcoming, joy). But as I glance over the index of Poems '23-'54, find few hints of this progression; beyond a tendency to begin dirty (world: sordid, satires) & end clean (earth: lyrical, lovepoems)" (Selected Letters, p. 261). The latter tendency is fairly evident in Viva, where three of the first four sonnets are satires (XIV, XXI, and XXVIII) and the fourth deals with the dispiriting effects of lust. Moreover, the last nine sonnets treat love, transcendence, and the transforming power of the speaker's lady.

Cummings' satirical vein, which was only briefly revealed in the earlier sonnets, becomes more evident in Viva. The first sonnet of the volume, #VII (CP 315), is an angry satire on the "Serene, Illustrious, and Beatific/Lord of Creation, MAN." Cummings is outraged by the assumption that God is dead and that man is master of the universe, particularly as that mastery is demonstrated by the conversion of "earth's most terrific/quadruped" to "BilliardBalls."¹

Cummings' awareness, as well as his hatred, of the doctrines of relativity, materialism, and existentialism is evident in this frequently anthologized poem. He reviles them because they reduce all things to

¹Cummings' self-proclaimed "totem" was the elephant, and this fact may explain the intensity of his outrage at their conversion. See The Magic Maker, pp. 22-24.

the limits of human intellect, and Cummings abhors any philosophy which presumes man the measure of all. The double pun on "interred" (l. 10) reflects his attitude: God has not only been brought down to earth (in-Terre-d) in order to be buried (interred), but also and consequently covered by dung (in-turd). Cummings is reminded that walls, or limitations, are, as Frost said, unnatural and manmade creations; any abstract philosophy is a limitation of reality.

Cummings pursues this theme, which was touched on in "Five" II of Is 5, in the second sonnet, #XIV (CP 322). This poem begins with the speaker and his mistress engaged in desultory, disjointed post-coital conversation. The woman wants to know the time; when the speaker tells her to "consider rather heavenly things," she misinterprets his admonition, saying that the stars, like everything else, are "planned." He tries to show her that the patterns she finds in the stars (i.e. the constellations, specifically Cassiopeia's chair) are arbitrary creations of the intellect in its attempt to power over things. Indeed, Cummings implies that all things in the phenomenal, not just the overtly mythic, are partly constructed by the mind. That includes the speaker's emotional relation with his woman; he discovers in the course of the conversation that his feelings for her have been framed by "lust" rather than love, and that he cares naught for her. His lust has created a connection between them as much as mind creates a constellation from disjunct stars.

Here, as in many of the early sonnets, sexuality motivated by simple lust is spiritually depressing. That the moon is, at the moment of the speaker's discovery, "thinner than a watchspring," suggests

that he is not only emotionally depressed but also waning spiritually - even he has fallen prey, in imagining the moon like a watchspring, to the temptation to reduce external reality to a telling mechanism.

Viva XXI (CP 330) vividly and dynamically satirizes a crowd of drunken revelers staggering out of a speakeasy at dawn.

helves surling out of eakspeasies per(reel)hapsingly
proregress heandshe-ingly people
trickle curselaughgroping shrieks bubble
squirmwrithed staggerful unstrolls collaps ingly
flash a of-faceness stuck thumblike into pie
is traffic this recalls hat gestures bud
plumptumbling hand voices Eye Doangivuh suddenly
immense impotently Eye Doancare Eye
And How replies the upsquirtingly careens
the to collide flatfooting with Wushyuhname
a girl-flops to the Geddup curb leans
carefully spewing into her own Shush Shame

as(out from behind Nowhere)creeps the deep thing
everybody sometimes calls morning

As Rudolf Von Abele points out, this sonnet provides a good example of Cummings' use of "anagramming and spoonerism" to intensify meaning (p. 914). The word arrangement in lines one through twelve reflects the shameful confusion and unnatural distortion of the celebrants, while the final couplet, stated in clear, exact syntax, captures the contrasting crisp precision of the dawn. Here the "dirty" world of men is set against the clear yet indescribable deep thing of nature as it rises "out from behind Nowhere."

Cummings' satirical voice intensifies in #XXVIII (CP 337), which calls for chaos to come again, bringing cleansing destruction to an insane world. The speaker describes a female motion-picture "star," perhaps Jean Harlow, whose "vast one function," he notes acidly, is to make real women look bad to real men. She represents the first cause

of the speaker's ire: "the movies"; they have perverted the sensibility of modern man by creating a "believably enlarged" but distorted vision of life. They have almost subliminally rendered the real world an unsatisfactory place to most people by misleading them into judging the real as a Douglas Fairbanks or Mary Pickford might respond to the contrived, fictional world in which they "exist." Moreover, the artists - those whose job it is to create healthy guiding fictions - have "napped," thereby allowing the movies to become a perverse rather than a sanitizing art. Hence the poet's call for chaos; Cummings implies that only out of the complete destruction of the old illusions and social myths can a revolutionary art emerge to restore man to woman and mankind to nature.

All good satire has traditionally had an explicitly stated or clearly implied "code" to which moral or social behavior is compared; Cummings' code is becoming more evident. In these sonnets his main target is modern man's arrogant and egotistical assumption that he is lord of creation. In assuming dominion over all, and believing only in his own powers to reason and imagine, man has distorted reality by imposing on it, and on himself as a part of nature, patterns or myths which prevent him from fully perceiving the whole or even from perceiving accurately. He has cut himself off from his natural participation in the life deep down things by surrendering to his desire to power over them.

Cummings' interest in the demimonde waned in the five years which separated Is 5 and Viva. With the exception of Viva XXI, which portrays a gang of drunken revelers staggering from a bar at dawn, the only other "dirty" sonnet is #XLIX (CP 358), which treats a loveless

but sexually fulfilling encounter. As he did in the early sonnets dealing with loveless fornication, Cummings finds simple lust a self-destructive and deathful act. In this sonnet, simple sex is a sort of "salute" to Aphrodite, the "once and once only, Queen" of lust. Not only does the single-minded mechanicity of the speaker's attentions to his unnamed bedmate, who is very likely a whore, betray the absence of love in their relation, but also the woman's cries of unwillingness suggest a semi-ravishment. The speaker is wryly aware of his brutal behavior, although his awareness doesn't prevent him from continuing; he knows that the emotion possessing him is not love, "love being something possibly more intricate." He recognizes in his behavior an instance of the primal force or emotion mythicized as Aphrodite, the foam-born goddess of sexual passion who rose to "undeath" from the "deeplyness" of the elemental human psyche. He also knows that his salutes to lust lead inevitably to "doom."

The maturation of his satirical vision may explain Cummings' declining interest in the demimonde and fornication. As he enlarges the scope of his criticism to include man's deceptive mythmaking, his concern for smaller, less universal targets dwindles.

In the early sonnets, sexual union is sometimes treated as a phenomenal analogue to transcendent unity, and coition as an avenue into timelessness. Through the sexual metaphor, Viva XXXV (CP 344) tells us how to live rightly in time. Cummings' message is that one must embrace the present moment utterly and selflessly, as one embraces his beloved, if he is to live fully. The vehicle for this theme is a

version (an inversion, really) of the myth of Leda and the Swan.¹ In this sonnet the traditional roles have been reversed; the Leda-figure here - the "what is" or present moment - lives and dies passionately ("strictly fiercely and wholly"), while the Swan-lover is a coldly impersonal intelligence. Solemn, impeccable, and "feathered with green facts," he suggests to us the analytic or scientific faculty of modern man. That is, he separates himself from life and death through the operation of the rational intellect. But awakened like Sleeping Beauty by a "little fluttering" of life at his lips, he reacts keenly "to dreamings more than truth untrue," becoming aware of the "illustrious unknown" life of the present. Once awakened, he is as emotionally transformed as Robinson Crusoe was when he discovered the proof of a new life amidst a barren, self-created world. As Stetler says, the lover's "self-contained existence" disappears as a result of his miraculous discovery (p. 49). He learns that one must live in the "what is," which though mortal and external to him is as alive as anything can be, if one is to find the true happiness symbolized by the sexual thrill implicit in the myth.

The illuminating aspect of sexual love is also treated in Viva LXIV (CP 373), the first sonnet of the final group of seven which ends the volume. Addressing his lady, the speaker begins by dismissing the material universe that dresses "its soullessness by lovely/antics of ridiculous molecules." He asserts that it must ultimately "unexist" or

¹Cf. Stetler, pp. 48-50.

fade into nonbeing. The only exception to this assumption is the permanence of their "young kiss," for it is the outward and visible manifestation of a spiritual fusion which aims at a perfectly spiritual, timeless union - the "most precise essential flame/never which waked." Forgetting the world of time and space, "nakedest" and "perfectly," they "dive out of tinying time" into "supreme Now" and forgetting their former existence, find "new textures of actual cool stupendous is." They selflessly plunge into the transcendence which subsumes the phenomenal, touching the "Yes" that exists "behind each no."

That the speaker and the lady find transcendence through the gateway of sexual union is implicit. Their kiss and the complementary operations of her "fate" and his "life" suggest that Cummings is describing in terms of the spirit the ecstasy produced by their physical union.

As he did in the earlier sonnets, Cummings continues to praise his lady's power over him in Viva. In #LXIII (CP 372), he implores her to be unto him "as rain is unto colour," to "create" him by her very presence. His "how," "where," and "still invisible when" are entirely inspired by her. Yet their love is a mutual sharing, and he makes her world too; he is "like a sun which must go/sometimes, to make an earth gladly seem firm" for her. And he also shares her "dearest fears" completely.

Cummings seems to have become firmer not only in his satirical vision but also in his formulation of the nature of life, death, and transcendence. His assertion of equal power in this sonnet is matched

by a more authoritative, tutorial pose in LXIV, LXVII, LVIII, and LXIX. He instructs and defines more explicitly now, implying a firmer grasp of the nature of being.

In sonnets LXV and LXVI, Cummings praises his lady by imagining what life would be like should he and she be "not amazing" (i.e. "without love"). In #LXV (CP 374), he knows that she would marvel at his disappearance, wondering what has become of her lover, who with "gradual acute lusting glance" hunted "the beast Tomorrow." More significantly, he knows, and wants her to know also, that he would be completely disoriented without her love; he would become a stranger to himself, wondering who the "creature of shadow" is that "washes my nightmare from his eyes." In #LXVI (CP 375), he describes his life in her absence as a nightmarish detachment from the world about him. In his lady's absence, he is cut off from free contact with external reality; in fact, externality becomes merely the mirror of his psyche. Without the lady's mediating influence, he not only finds himself locked in the house of his mind but also becomes mildly schizophrenic. He literally terrorizes himself.

The final sonnet of Viva, #LXX (CP 379), praises the speaker's lady's transcendental power.

here is the ocean, this is moonlight: say
that both precisely beyond either were -
so in darkness ourselves go, mind in mind

which is the thrilling least of all (for love's
secret supremely clothes herself with day)

i mean, should any curious dawn discuss
our mingling spirits, you would disappear
unreally; as this planet (understand)

forgets the entire and perpetual sea

- but if yourself consider wonderful
that your(how luminous)life toward twilight will
dissolve reintegrate beckon through me,
i think it is less wonderful than this

only by you my heart always moves

The essence of the speaker's thought is that the lady "moves" his heart not only when she is with him and making love but also when she is not with him and when the activities of the day and life would appear to have made her disappear. As Norman Friedman says, "the speaker represents himself and his heart as the sea, and his lady as the moon, the point being that, although the moon can be seen chiefly at night, his heart keeps following her influence even during the day when she is generally invisible" (The Art, p. 94). The point should be made that the speaker sees that the lady also finds her life in him; he knows that their love is a synergetic relation which is "precisely beyond" either of them individually.

Interestingly, the speaker recognizes that their relation is the "least" elevated stage of true love. He knows that they are at best benighted. But he also implies that love's day will come for them.

For Cummings, "love" means not only a profoundly tender and passionate affection for his lady but also the condition of "perfect givingness" and interpenetration that characterizes the transcendent¹ world of dream. He attempts to define the omnipresence and omnipotence

¹ Cf. The Growth, pp. 10-11.

of the latter kind of love in Viva LXVIII (CP 377).

but if a living dance upon dead minds
why, it is love; but at the earliest spear
of sun perfectly should disappear
moon's utmost magic, or stones speak or one
name control more incredible splendor than
our merely universe, love's also there

Love is the ultimate binding force of existence; it subsumes all. It not only encompasses the phenomenal - "Love" is outside the final parenthesis in line fourteen - but is also copresent with the world of time and space; it is both here and beyond. Thus, while love is beyond the power of man to measure, it may, like Christ, be "here imprisoned" and "tortured here." When love is abused or repressed, it explodes violently; it "maims and blinds" because we have not made ourselves capable of dealing freely with it, because we are afraid or incapable of allowing it free expression. If we give ourselves to love, however, we will find "living"; we will transcend the grave and break the only parenthetical bounds of the phenomenal.

I noted earlier that Cummings' conceptualization of the nature of transcendence was rather vague and often fancifully romantic. The transcendental sonnets of Viva imply he has become firmer in his vision. Viva LXIV (CP 373) is very explicit on the spiritual composition of transcendence. The "soullessness" of "ridiculous molecules" is doomed to absolute oblivion, while transcendence is imaged as "a most precise essential flame." Transcendence is a timeless continuum of "supreme Now" and "actual cool stupendous is." It is no longer a trivial, fanciful elsewhere or elsewhen of "costlier ports of commerce."

In Viva LXIX (CP 378), Cummings' speaker attempts to instruct his

beloved in the existence and nature of transcendence. By pointing out to her how the "keen ship" on which they are sailing "lifts (skillfully/ like some bird which is all birds but more fleet)/herself against the air," he provides her with a metaphor which will facilitate her conceptualization of transcendence.¹ His second step is an instructive rhetorical question.

whose do you
suppose possibly are certain hands, terse
and invisible, with large first new stars
knitting the structure of distinct sunset

driving white spikes of silence into joists
hewn from hugest colour
(and which night hoists
miraculously above the always
beyond such wheres and fears or any when
unwondering immense directionless
horizon)
-do you perhaps know these workmen?

Even as he asks, the speaker tells her that there is an existence beyond the phenomenal world of where and when, and that this state is reachable (it is populated by workmen) through night and death. He implies that she must imitate the ship and the sunset, and face night bravely if she is to sail beyond the horizon. And she must, like the invisible workmen, participate in transcendence; it is an active, though paradoxically timeless, realm.

The moon remains Cummings' premier symbol of transcendence.

structure, miraculous challenge, devout am
upward deep most invincible unthing

¹Stetler cites this poem and these lines as evidence of R. P. Blackmur's mistaken judgement of Cummings (p. 51).

- stern sexual timelessness, outtowering
this noisy impotence of not and same

answer, beginning, ecstasy, to dare:
prouder than all mountains, more than all
oceans various

and while everywhere
beneath thee and about thyself a small
hoping insect, humanity, achieves
(moult beyond difficult moult) amazing doom
who standest as thou hast stood and thou shalt stand.

Nor any dusk but kneelingly believes
thy secret and each morning stoops to blend

her star with what huge merciful forms presume

Here in Viva XLII (CP 351), Cummings praises the moon as a living, yet timeless presence reminding man of the existence of a vital state of being towards which he must strive, "moult beyond difficult moult." Like all of the transcendent, the moon is an "am," a living identity, and an "unthing" or spiritual entity. The moon is proud, for it is self-reliant and whole, and beyond the trivial, impotent lies of "not and same" that so attract rational man.

In Viva XIV the speaker discovered that trivial sex led to doom. In Viva LXVIII (CP 376), he reiterates the insight of Donne's "Holy Sonnet" X ("Death Be Not Proud"). In Cummings' poem, the speaker discovers that "darkness" shall not "quite outmarch forever" - that death itself shall eventually be dead.

The occasion of the speaker's discovery is a day when death's triumph seems complete; he is sure that even death "must remember" this day when he has taken to himself not only "Life's animals" but also "angry seasalt" and "indignant clover." Yet even as he recognizes the power of death, the speaker apprehends the reaper's failure; he perceives

"several smoothly gesturing stars" beyond the "transparent walls" surrounding the deathful world, and this perception generates the conviction that death's day is truly over. As a result of his insight, the speaker senses he has become one of the few "most rare perfectly dear" souls who, having transcended the mutable world, live in the timeless and deathless realm of "Love."

The sonnets of Viva clarify a number of aspects of Cummings' vision of the phenomenal and the transcendental, as well as the "mechanisms" which make passage from the one to the other possible. They tell us a great deal about Cummings' conception of transcendence. It is the condition of being in a harmonious and uncontrived relation to physical nature. That is to say, the transcendent individual accepts nature without demanding that it conform to the dictates of the ego. Unfortunately, such selflessness is a rare quality in most people, who demand that life conform to received, socially inculcated patterns. Transcendence is also a timeless noumenal condition of being - a non-material, spiritual unity of all things. This realm is reached, it seems, only through physical death and only by souls which have achieved the first kind of transcendence; it is a sort of heaven.

"Death" itself has several distinct though clearly related meanings. It is first physical mortality, the final end of all matter. This sort of death is the destiny of those who cannot free themselves of the unworld. But because death is a natural phenomenon and an intrinsic element in the cycles of nature, it may be seen as a passageway to Spring and dayspring - to rebirth. Death becomes a metaphor for the necessary destruction of the derived elements which imprison the human

spirit; only as received "perceptual sets" are eliminated can one attain transcendental vision. Not infrequently, Cummings implies by death the little death of sexual climax. If the climax is the consequence of a loveless coition, it can generate an intuition of ultimate, spiritual obliteration. If it comes as an element of true love, it can illuminate the participants, making them aware of the greater fulfillment and release that characterizes transcendental being.

Cummings' idea of love is also clarified in these sonnets. It is not only a deep and tender regard for another human but also a recognition and wholehearted acceptance of the individuality, the "thou-ness" in Buber's terminology, of the "not-I."¹ Love is the way to both earthly and heavenly transcendence, for in both realms the transcendent exist in a condition of loving acceptance.

It also becomes clear that one attains wholeness and complete freedom of self only as one submerges one's egocentric, "framing" demands on the world - only as these "die." Only in transcendence, and only through love, can one fully become oneself because only in the realm of dream is true becoming possible; in the unworld one shapes and is shaped, one bullies and is bullied, by self-created and received patterns of perception and behavior.

¹See Marvin Price Garrett, Jr. "Death and Love in the Poetry of E. E. Cummings," master's thesis (University of Florida, 1965), pp. 5-6.

CHAPTER THREE
THE MIDDLE SONNETS

No Thanks (1935), Cummings' sixth volume, is, like Viva, organized by the arrangement of its sonnets; they form a very regular, symmetrical framework for the volume as a whole. Eighteen of the seventy-one poems in No Thanks are sonnets, and these are arranged to form two overlapping groups of nine poems each. Beginning with #3, the second poem from the beginning, every fourth poem is a sonnet. This group of nine ends with #35. The second group of nine begins with #37 and ends with #69, the second to last poem; again, every fourth poem is a sonnet. The first group, those found in the first half of the volume, are generally worldly or satirical - "dirty" in Cummings' terms. The second group, those found in the second half, treat spring, love, and transcendence; they are "clean." In order to prevent a strong thematic division of his volume, Cummings links the two groups by making #35, the last of the sonnets in the first half, a transcendental poem, and by giving #37, the first sonnet of the second half, a worldly theme. By inverting the themes, and by separating #35 and #37 by only a single poem, Cummings maintains the unity of the volume and effects a smooth transition from one thematic group to the other.

Unlike Viva, however, the sonnets of No Thanks begin on a transcendental note. No Thanks #3 (CP 386) records a moment when the speaker, after tentative, groping thought, after discovering the reality of

transcendence through love, and after apprehending the evanescence of mortal existence, explains his insight to his lover.

The sonnet develops the affirmation: "that which we die for lives/ as wholly as that which we live for dies." In the first eight lines, the speaker is in the process of enunciating and clarifying his thought. Lines one through four define the speaker and his lover; they are "alive in spite of mirrors" and yet "have died beyond the clock." What is more, through their love they are at one with themselves and each other. Through love, in both its carnal and spiritual manifestations, the speaker and his lady have broken the chains of sterile, narcissistic egoism and clock time (i.e. the man-made impress of sequence and division upon an organic indivisible process) to become a new, compound entity - timeless in time, single yet double. The next four lines resume the enunciation of the "kernel" sentence ("that which we die for..."), only to break off to explain the process of dying. There is no ambiguity to "die for," although there are several different, clearly functional meanings.

"Die for" is slang for "desire strongly," and transcendence is the condition desired. "Die for" is also literal; the lovers must die in order to attain eternal life: "that which lives." "Die for" is metaphorical; the speaker and his lady are reborn through the redemptive power of love; they have "died" from one state of being to be born in a better. Finally, "die for" suggests sexual release, and that which the lovers die to attain is mutual sexual ecstasy. Whatever the case, the speaker hastens to note that their dying is achieved spontaneously, and "not when or unless/if or to prove, imperfectly or since." That is,

their dying is selfless rather than selfish, uncontrolled by time or condition, uncaused and perfect.

Yet dying entails "horrors" of loss, for it is hard agony to give or commit oneself to another wholeheartedly - to break out of one's mirror-like ego-shell. Stars, being transcendent and complete, cannot observe this agony, and roses can only "wince" in sympathy, so close are they to transcendence themselves. It is through the agony of dying, however, that passage is made, and the sonnet's structure reflects the transition; line nine states the speaker's vision completely for the first time: "that which we die for lives."

In the last six lines, the speaker praises the new, timeless existence he has found, ecstatically rejoices with his lover in their love, and closes with a restatement of his theme and its corollary ("that which we live for dies").

In Viva, the thrust of the initial sonnets was essentially satirical. In No Thanks, the satirical sonnets are accompanied by sonnets which explain or teach how to live rightly in time. For instance, #23 (CP 406) is a mild satire of America, as it is embodied by a man named Smith, who the poet concludes is a "death" and a "marvel." Smith has become an unnatural marvel suffering death-in-life because he has abdicated feeling for thought and thought for knowledge: "he does not have to feel because he thinks"; "he does not have to think because he knows." Because he has accepted, apparently unconsciously, a set of fixed opinions, conventions, and "facts," Smith "cannot understand" his life. And feeling a gulf between what he "knows" and what he intuitively feels, he drinks to escape. He is married, but "lies afraid" of life, love, and death. He is quintessentially "American."

"Little Joe" Gould, on the other hand, the subject of the next sonnet, #27 (CP 410), offers a complete (and deliberate, I believe) contrast to the Smiths of America. ¹ A scion of one of America's great families and a graduate of our oldest university, Gould has the potential to be a Smith, to live within received ideas and traditions, yet he is portrayed as utterly self-reliant and free. Because he is happy to be himself - to love and to feel - he becomes for Cummings a symbol of the right way to live (the hexameter lines suggest Gould's heroic nature), and his legendary Oral History a record of his continuing rebirth "by innumerable kinds-of-deaths." It is "more fun to be more," like Gould, than to be, like America, "fooled" by false, self-contrived fictions.

No Thanks #11 (CP 394) contrasts Cummings' view of modern mankind with his vision of the ideal man. Modern man is a "Foetus (unborn to not die/safely whose epoch fits him like a grave)." Caught up with the desire for political and material power over things ("money men motors 'my'/yachts wolfhounds women"), modern man has lost his soul and become an unholy ghost, "fleeing himself for selves more strangely made." In fear of life and his own nature, he has hidden behind masks made by society and history; reduced to the most elemental existence, he merely "answers eats moves remembers is afraid."

¹Charles Norman's description of Gould illuminates many of the poem's allusions (The Magic Maker, pp. 143-148).

Seeing that which he longs to become but cannot be, he comes to hate instead of love; each disassociated modern "hates a Man" because he cannot be one himself. That is, he not only comes to hate the idea of complete organicity, which he knows he cannot attain, but also he hates the man who, unlike himself, lives in harmony with himself and his environment. Modern man hates him who has integrated the elements of foetus and ghost and who

would rather make than have and give than lend
-being through failures born who cannot fail

having no wealth but love, who shall not spend
my fortune (although endlessness should end).

Norman Friedman cites the lines above as an example of Cummings' conception of the truly alive and self-reliant man: "this is a man who knows death but chooses life, who knows grief but chooses joy, who knows fear but chooses love; one who, in imitation of Christ (whom a Unitarian Cummings reveres with a personal devotion ...), redeems chaos by remaining true" (The Art, p. 12).

No Thanks #31 (CP 414) presents Christ as a pattern for those who would attain transcendence. Cummings observes that true men, like Christ, remain true to themselves amidst the chaos and decay of time. All temporal things are corruptible: "yesterday's perfection" loses its cleverness; "things whose slendering sweetness touched renown" come to "stink of failure"; dreams are unmade, leaving a "most smashed unworld." To the true man, knowledge of such mutability is "anguish" so great (a star could not contain it) that he does not know if he can bear more and live. Yet in spite of his agony, this man - an "eternal mere one bursting soul" - likes the world only, embracing his anguish as an

organic part of his life. As a result, "comes peace unto men who are always men," and a man shall become that "which a god sometimes is" - a truly alive transcendental being: an "IS."

In the satirical sonnets of No Thanks, Cummings remains concerned about the debilitating fictions which man has interposed between himself and reality. #15 (CP 398) is a good example of Cummings' hatred of deceptive myths. Here the speaker attacks "scientific" parenthood and the elevation of scientific myth over more wholesome myths of imagination. Cummings takes his stand with those "joybegotten whelps" who are raised on and soothed by "myths like Jonah and the Whale," and against those who would make Santa Claus a "criminal concept" and replace him with Charles Darwin. Cummings chooses myths which teach us of selfless love and rebirth, and reviles those which teach that the world rewards selfish behavior.

One of the interesting features of this poem is Cummings' use of distorted, pseudo-scientific jargon to suggest the distortions of the modern parents. Friedman notes that the poet, in contrast, speaks in "the language of the gutter modified by the locutions" of George Herri-man's Krazy Kat, perhaps to emphasize "the distinction between them and others like himself who are more old-fashioned" (The Art, p. 77). Krazy Kat's language is fantastic and imaginative, given to suggestive comic puns ("sin silly"), and appropriate for one taking his stand with the imaginative and traditional against the modern, rational, and scientific.

Cummings offers two sonnets early in No Thanks which specifically attempt to tell his readers "how to run the world." The second sonnet of the volume, #7 (CP 390), is a delightful last will and testament in

which Cummings marshals eight pieces of advice on how to run the world, lists his debts, and names his heirs.

The octave is organized, appropriately, along the lines of a child's "ABC" book.¹ The lessons the speaker professes are not unexpected; he advises against the desire to power over things, recommending instead openness to love and feeling and escape from egoism. One point is made for each line of the octave, although there is no strict line-to-point correlation.

The sestet consists of two parts, the title and the speaker's designation of his heirs. The title of the sestet is divisible into three statements: 1) "grass is flesh" 2) "swim/who can and bathe who must" 3) "any dream means more than sleep as more than know means guess." These affirm the unity of nature, admonish each man to live according to his individual lights, and urge man to dream and guess rather than sleep and know. That is, man is to live imaginatively and emotionally rather than automatically and analytically.

The second part of the sestet, the "will" proper, has only two parts. Here the poet recognizes that he owes "dying one life" (but implies he has more lives) and wills his "rest" to children building a "rainman out of snow." At this point, the ambiguous diction creates a field of meaning which adds depth to the speaker's earlier playfulness.

¹Friedman suggests that the organizational principle is a "kind of mock-agenda format" which parodies those who think the world needs a kind of program (*The Growth*, pp. 85-86). I feel the nature of the poet's heirs supports my interpretation.

We may take his "rest" to mean the speaker's poetic and artistic achievements, and understand that he sees his work as valuable to either future generations or to the innocent. If we take "rest" to mean his other lives, then he leaves them all the life-possibilities he did not use or the encapsulated "lives" recorded in his poems. Finally, "rest" may mean the tranquil peace which the speaker has now attained and which he desires for them also. The children are the poet's chosen heirs because they have the creative, unfettered imagination to build a "rainman" from snow. They are not daunted in their efforts by the thought of the sure dissolution of their creation, by the adult knowledge of failure in time; rather, they live and build in the moment. They live "suddenly without thinking," imaginatively transforming snow into men ("grass into flesh"). In being aware of the underlying unity of snow and rain, the children seem to have instinctively apprehended the transcendental wholeness of nature.

No Thanks #19 (CP 402) provides further insight into Cummings' view of how one attains transcendence by participating fully in the present moment, the "Now."

who before dying demands not rebirth

of such than hungrily more swiftness as
with(feel)pauseless immeasurably Now
cancels the childfully diminishing earth
-never whose proudly life swallowed is by

(with hope two eyes a memory this brow
five or three dreamfuls of despair that face)

large one coloured nonthings of gluttonous sky-
nor(as a blind,how timidly,throb;which
hints being;suggests identity)breathes fleet
perfectly far from tangible domains
rare with most early soul

him shall untouch

meaningless precision and complete fate

(he must deny mind:may believe in brains.

The proper manner of living in the phenomenal world is defined here negatively four ways. First, Cummings says one must live and die in time without demanding an instant rebirth. Second, one must swallow life - that is, embrace fully the multiform totality of phenomenal existence - if one is not to be swallowed by "nonthings of gluttonous sky." Third, one must not view phenomenal life as a kind of insignificant larval stage preceeding a transcendental soul-state (cf. Actualities VI, CP 157). And finally, he advises that one "must deny mind," the trap of scientifically reducing life to sterile abstraction. If one can accomplish these tasks, he shall transcend untouched by "meaningless pre-¹cision and complete fate."

Cummings digs deeply into his bag of syntactical and grammatical tricks in this poem. I believe his dislocations and distortions fail to enhance either the quality of his thought or our perception of it. But the question of why he chose to write in his most linguistically complex style remains. It may be that the fluidity and indistinctness of meaning generated by his techniques is aimed at thwarting our rage for order, completeness, and precision (i.e. conventionality) of statement. We must deny that in ourselves ("mind") which seeks to make easy

¹Friedman correctly says that Cummings is describing a "useless failure" who is worthy of our admiration and imitation (The Art, p. 13). He is a failure in the world's eyes, and therefore triumphantly alive and successfully independent in Cummings'.

sense of an irreducible mystery, but we are, therefore, constrained to use all of our powers (perhaps to puzzle out Cummings' meaning in this sonnet).

#37 (CP 420), the first sonnet of the second group of sonnets in No Thanks, defines a true man. Couched as a challenge to the reader and the world, the poem tells us how to "conceive a man."

conceive a man, should he have anything
would give a little more than it away

(his autumn's winter being summer's spring
who moved by standing in november's may)
from whose (if loud most howish time derange

the silent whys of such a deathlessness)
remembrance might no patient mind unstrange
learn (nor could all earth's rotting scholars guess
that life shall not for living find the rule)

and dark beginnings are his luminous ends
who far less lonely than a fire is cool
took bedfellows for moons mountains for friends

-open your thighs to fate and (if you can
withholding nothing) World, conceive a man

The true man is totally independent of his possessions and utterly unselfish: "should he have anything," he "would give a little more than it away." He is unafraid of winter and death because they are to him new beginnings, his "autumn's winter being summer's spring," and conversely, "dark beginnings are his luminous ends." He moves toward his "ends" paradoxically - by "standing"; that is, he does not seek irritably after a preconceived goal, some future bliss, but rather has a kind of negative capability to simply be (cf. Garrett, p. 51). He has the capacity to accept life without demanding that it conform to his expectations; he takes "bedfellows for moons mountains for friends." As Fried-

man says, this "is a man in harmony with nature, not demanding a deathless life on earth" (The Art, pp. 12-13).

The true man's life is a mystery beyond analysis and biography, incomprehensible to those who attempt to assess from outside his milieu. Neither patient minds nor all scholars can learn from his "rememberance," for the true man's life is not lived according to "rule." His "life," existence or history, cannot be abstracted; it is irreducibly what it is when it is.

Cummings closes the sonnet with an apostrophe to the world, here both mankind and nature, to "open your thighs" and "conceive a man." That is, he desires us to both comprehend the nature of a true man and to bring one forth. It is in the nature of things for true men to be, and the poet wants the world to bring them to birth, "withholding nothing."

Friedman says that the "really significant development" in No Thanks "is the large and clear group of poems devoted not so much to subjects having transcendental aspects as to transcendentalism as a subject in itself" (The Growth, p. 84). Certainly the thrust of the sonnets which are discussed above has been to explore how to live transcendently in time. Both the satires, which deal with men and societies which live wrongly, and the poems which tell us how to run the world properly are concerned with establishing principles by which we can transcend the limitations of our preprogrammed perceptions and responses. Cummings is clearly interested now in coming to grips with the basic problem of discovering how to live in the phenomenal world of death and time. His sonnets have become more practical.

Of the nine sonnets in the latter half of No Thanks, four deal explicitly with transcendence and the other five touch on that topic. #35 and #37 act as transitional sonnets, combining both Cummings' concern with living rightly in the phenomenal and his exploration of transcendence in and beyond time.

No Thanks #35 (CP 418) describes a symbolic landscape. We see a seashore at nightfall, but the poet sees in the relations of earth, sea, and oncoming night a paradigm of life, death, and transcendence. The earth is a symbol of transcendent man (the poet), who, proud and alone, gives "more than all/life's busy little dyings may possess." The speaker is awed by "how sincere large distinct and natural/he comes to his disappearance." Only those who are themselves enormous failures, in Cummings' sense (cf. #19, #31), can understand the earth's calmness in the face of death. The sea, symbolizing death and time, measures the earth, like a mortician, easily; time will swallow the earth, and all phenomenal things, as critics will "feast" upon a poet's remains, yet it will not conquer the earth nor subdue the poet, for beyond earth and sea, encompassing both, is "the unimaginable night not known" of tran-
1
scendence.

Cummings again goes out into the night in #45 (CP 428). This sonnet describes a moment between evening and night when the speaker, lying

¹Cf. Stetler, pp. 55-56. Although I think he underestimates the certainty of transcendence implied in the poem, Stetler makes the good point that it is a "ghost" that "goes under" and that "what is buried is only the shell" of a man whose "real essence is what he accomplishes with his life."

out watching the stars, attains an insight into transcendence. Such an insight occurs "sometimes in)Spring"; the condition within the speaker must be right; he must be in a loving, "ignorant" and selfless state. When insight is achieved, a "someone," a man in a non-transcendent state, becomes transformed into an "i," a true man who in the moment, feeling "vastness of love," breathes a timeless perfection, forgets the unworld of time, and attains a peace that "outthunders silence."

Such moments of transcendence as may be attained in the temporal world are evanescent, passing in a "heartbeat." But in that moment exists a kind of timelessness. Cummings, like William Blake, seems to find heaven by holding "eternity in an hour."

These magical moments of transcendence prepare the speaker for the "deathless life" of transcendence much as a waterpump might be primed for continuous operation by the addition of several buckets of water. These priming moments make us aware of and prepare us for transcendence beyond the phenomenal.

No Thanks #49 (CP 432), like #35 and #45, also records a moment of insight. Again the poet speaks with assurance; he is able now to teach his lady the proper way to apprehend her life and death. The poem describes a violent storm that has struck unexpectedly and frightened the poet's lady with its catastrophic fury. Recognizing her bewilderment, the poet creates his sonnet, which recalls and interprets their experience, in order to reassure her and remind her of the necessity to comprehend existence "under imagination."

silent unday by silently not night

The significance of this sonnet is that it reflects Cummings' growing assurance of his own transcendental vision. He has moved from a concern for his own vision of life to a concern for his lady's. The viability of his own ideas is not in doubt; certain of his own stance, he can now reassure his lady's fears without self-doubt or supposition.

In the final sonnet of No Thanks, #69 (CP 454), the speaker resumes the role of spokesman for or embodiment of both worldly and transcendent existence to instruct his lady in the proper way to achieve "the awful mystery of light." First, he advises, "reason let others give and realness bring." She must neither seek for rational explanations of life nor treat the phenomenal world as if it were ultimately real. Rather, the lady must "ask the always impossible" of her lover and existence. She must not be content with the world as it exists within the limitations of a particular "wherewhen," but seek its perfection. She must "ask" without making selfish demands, without forcing the world to be solely for her. She must ask and be open to the answers.

Louis Rus has pointed out that the ambiguous syntax makes "the sentences in lines three through twelve ... both statements and questions." He says that these questions "are asked and there is always something of the poet's positive answers contained within the questions; he gives positive answers yet there are always questions within the statements. The effect attained is a vagueness that hints at things beyond understanding; this is entirely different from the "reason" which others give and the "realness" which they bring" (p. 73). In giving the lady four examples of the kind of impossible questions she must ask in order to achieve transcendence, the poet is also providing insights into transcendence.

He both urges and encourages. This double movement, generated by the ambiguous syntax, makes her questions the speaker's assertions and his conclusion both contingent and fixed.

This sonnet, like many of the earlier sonnets in the volume, reflects Cummings' awareness of an antagonism that exists, actually or potentially, between himself and his lady and those "others" who are content with reason and realness. However, while his antipathy does not change, he moves from a stance of active confrontation and attack (cf. #7, #11, #15, #23) to dismissing the others as irrelevant to the individual in search of transcendence. The others are now a "small million" futilely denying the "awful mystery." Cummings is now able to abjure them serenely and dispassionately.

Cummings touches upon the theme of death in a number of the sonnets of No Thanks. In #65 (CP 450), he affirms that transcendence is contingent upon death. If one is to ascend the "steep fragrance of eternity," adventure the "most not imagined life," and discover his true transcendental self, he must die. Death again means both physical mortality in time and a change of attitude toward life in the unworld. Transcendence requires the death of one's preoccupation with money, success, and reputation; fear of the night (of death, change, mystery, the loss of "day") must be abandoned and "night's mostness" embraced. Moreover, one must let his reliance on reason and reason's interpretation of the world (the "births of mind") go "silent," for they are distractions which seem to the this-worldly "more flowering than stars." To climb eternity, one must approach existence prayerfully - asking

rather than demanding, recognizing human imperfection, abandoning
the will to power over things.¹

By living in the transcendent mode in the phenomenal, one discovers and participates in his transcendental being "behind death's death." That is, one does not live in the world in order to get to a heaven that lies beyond or after life (although one does exist transcendently after life); rather, one attains the timeless world which coexists with and subsumes the phenomenal by selflessly embracing the phenomenal. For the truly alive, transcendence is not "when" but "now," "whenless" and "everywhere."

The theme of love is also present in No Thanks, although it is not explored here as much as in Viva.² #61 (CP 446) is an explicitly philosophical definition of "love's function" and lovers, and offers Cummings' ideas on the way to solve the alienation of modern man from nature.

love's function is to fabricate unknownness

(known being wishless;but love,all of wishing)
though life's lived wrongsideout,sameness chokes oneness
truth is confused with fact,fish boast of fishing

and men are caught by worms(love may not care
if time totters,light droops,all measures bend
nor marvel if a thought should weigh a star
-dreads dying least;and less,that death should end)

¹The succession of "if" clauses in ll. 1-7 and the movement of the soul, "world by than worlds immenser world" toward transcendence, suggest that Cummings conceived of the progress of the transcendent soul much as Dante conceived of the movement of the saved through the spheres to the Empyrean and God.

²Friedman says one of the crucial features of Viva is the gradual strengthening of the transcendental treatment of love (The Growth, p. 77).

how lucky lovers are(whose selves abide
under whatever shall discovered be)
whose ignorant each breathing dares to hide
more than most fabulous wisdom fears to see

(who laugh and cry)who dream,create and kill
while the whole moves;and every part stands still:

"To fabricate unknownness" is to make life a mystery for man again. Love creates in man the capacity for wonder, and allows man to move toward transcendence by discovering himself as he discovers the world. Love is vital because "life's lived wrongsideout" in our time; man, a part of the wholeness of nature, has internalized the world by reducing it to a collection of easily manipulatable facts and abstract relations through the dark glass of knowledge and reason. He has sought to heal the subject-object dichotomy by the power of rational analysis and scientific explanation; he has made the world safe for himself by pretending that all is ultimately knowable and measurable, by conceiving the world solely in terms of himself. The consequence of internalization is a perverse sterility. Man cannot interact and grow, attempt and fail and develop, if all that he has is but a version or reflection of himself. Love, in freeing nature from man and man from his conceptual onanism, allows man to evolve, to struggle, to transcend.

Because love and lovers accept "whatever shall discovered be," Friedman says that they can transcend "so-called civilization and the world of death and time" and "rise up to the world of dream" (The Art, p. 46). The universe as we conceive it may change utterly: time may totter, light droop, "all measures bend"; it may even die. But love, because it embraces the universe whatever its condition, dreads nothing. And lucky lovers, attempting life and death and living in the moment,

"dream create and kill/while the whole moves; and every part stands still."

Cummings implies, in several of these sonnets (#7, #35, #37), that the transcendent man is a poet and that the true poet is transcendently alive. #53 (CP 437) may be read as a description of the poet, his poem, and its effects on the lives of men.

The sonnet portrays a flower vendor and his horse as they peddle blooms in a city street, bringing beauty into an ugly world and feeding the citizens' hunger for "Is," "Love," and "Spring" by teaching them to see and feel. The speaker is impressed by the grace and power of the horse, which is no mere beast of burden but a proud individual "whose
¹
feet almost walk air." His master is a ragged man who limps beside his cart "crying silence upward." Like a bailiff crying a court of law to order, he calls for silence (Cummings' term for the condition of self-abnegation) before the beauty of his wares. The flowers themselves are the magical force of beauty which redeems men from "dark places." Their light "paints eyes" and "touches hands"; that is, the flowers create in the citizens the capacity to appreciate beauty in the world and the transcendent beauty of which the flowers are a temporal manifestation.

Like the flower vendor, the poet calls for our attention but is important only as far as his wares are important. His poem, symbolized by the horse and cart, is proud and independent, complete in itself, and

¹Lloyd Frankenberg, Pleasure Dome: On Reading Modern Poetry (Cambridge, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), p. 167. Frankenberg notes that the horse "represents the precariousness of beauty in the modern world."

no mere vehicle. The flowers suggest the beauties of the poem, and are the most significant element, of course, for they bring new life into the chaotic city of man. Reading the sonnet this way, one sees that Cummings is presenting poetry, and life itself, as a beautiful but subversive force. The horse "smiles" as it "stamps" out the drab ugliness of modern existence. Moreover, the central image implies that poetry is a "trojan horse" bringing revolutionary change into the world, "piercing clothes thoughts kissing wishes bodies" with unsuspected beauty.

The virtual absence of sonnets dealing with the demimonde, with the dispiriting effects of lust, and with death as a terrifying finality indicates, particularly when it is seen in the context of the themes which he does explore, that Cummings' stance toward phenomenal life is becoming more mature. He has given up childish things as he has grown wiser. He is concerned now with discovering and exploring how he and his lady can find the transcendence and love he knows exist.

As Norman Friedman has thoroughly noted, the poems of Viva and No Thanks also reflect Cummings' search for a mode of expression which is capable of reflecting the vitality and dynamic interaction of the timeless, simultaneous world of dream (see The Growth, pp. 75, 80). Just as he explores the nature of worldly and otherworldly transcendence, so he explores the capacity of the language to capture his insight effectively. The sonnets of both volumes reflect Cummings' experiments with typography and, particularly, with syntax and grammar. The language, like the minds and hearts of men, lives most fully only when it is free

of restrictive, arbitrary conventions of word order, punctuation, and typography.

Of the twenty-two new poems which were added to Collected Poems (1938), Cummings' first anthology, only two are sonnets. In #17 (CP 479), Cummings praises his lady and the power of her love to transform his life from failure to joy by tracing the redemptive effects her love has had for him and by explaining what its loss would mean. In order to convey the magnitude and meaning of his transformation, the speaker compares himself to a bowery bum (a failure) who has risen from the gutter as a result of a miraculous spiritual discovery to become an alive, transcendent individual.

The process of the speaker's redemption in #17 is clear. First, he miraculously becomes aware of "no/Where," of the existence of a life beyond the "flophouse" of the world. He fails to comprehend ("to map") this newly found state, perhaps because his powers of spiritual vision are undeveloped (they are still not "eyes") and he is trying to reduce unmappable "no/Where" to a rational scheme. At the same time, perhaps as a consequence of his attempt, the bum's ingrained this-worldliness, characterized by "mind," "roots among much soundless rubbish of guitars/ and watches." Even as he is trying to explore transcendence, he grubs like a bum in the trashheap, and, still "death's dollhead wandering under weakening stars," settles deeper into the rubbish of the phenomenal world. A further miracle is required; he must learn to feel, to empathize rather than analyze, to accept rather than manipulate. He discovers that it is not enough to simply apprehend the transcendental.

It is only as he "Feels" existence that he is renewed, that he becomes truly a man. If he "Feels" - the capitalization of the word emphasizes its importance - a new world is born for him, one that reciprocates his love, that cherishes and protects him as his "unlife bursts."

The speaker implies that he has suffered this process as a result of his lady's miraculous love. He has discovered transcendence, and the fullness of life in the unworld, through her. And he notes that the process can be more than reversed if she "should turn the infinite corner of love" or leave him. Then his "all" would disappear, leaving "no proof/not the least shadow of a. Not one smallest dream."

The lady is praised here, as often before, because she is the speaker's very life; she has become not only his avenue to true being but also life itself, and he is keenly aware of his gain. The awesome responsibility conferred on the lady as conservatrix of the speaker's spiritual health tends to explain Cummings' frequent didactic and consolatory poems; if she is to be his all, she must know how to be.

Telling his lady how and why to be is the speaker's purpose in the other sonnet included in New Poems, #22 (CP 484). Here he tells his lady:

you shall above all things be glad and young.
For if you're young, whatever life you wear

it will become you; and if you are glad
whatever's living will yourself become

The lady must accept the world gladly, with the openness and flexibility of a child, if she is to become one with "whatever's alive" or transcendent life. Yet she must also be fully a woman; the poet says that

although "girlboys may nothing more than boygirls need," he

can entirely her only love

whose any mystery makes every man's
flesh put space on; and his mind take off time.

Friedman, ignoring the sexual implications of this passage, says that the fifth line means that "ordinary lovers - those whose identity is confused and indistinct - may need nothing more than ordinary people to love" and that the poet is saying he can "entirely love her only whose mystery breaks down the usual categories and brings a man's body and mind thereby into the transcendental world" (The Growth, p. 92).

The poet continues his instruction in the sestet by warning the lady, Friedman also says, against "reason, the maker of categories" and exalting "organic reality." She must abhor thinking, "for that way knowledge lies," along with "the foetal grave called progress and negation's dead undoom." Thinking generates "lies," false abstracts of reality, and the deathful idea that man is increasing his dominion over nature. Thinking is saying "no" to the totality of life, separating existence into arbitrary sets and collections, removing the mystery from being, and results in a sterile "undoom." The poet would, and the lady should, "rather learn from one bird how to sing/ than teach ten thousand stars how not to dance."

In a number of the sonnets of Viva, the speaker recognized and praised his lady's power to make his life meaningful. But he also implied that theirs was a mutually elevating love (Viva LXX) beyond either of them to achieve singly. #17 of New Poems, in contrast, invests the whole of the speaker's life in his lady, who is treated as a kind of

personal divinity in whose dispensation lies the speaker's doom. Yet he can still instruct her, as he does in #22, in the proper way to live. I find these points of view contradictory and mutually exclusive. The poet does not derive from the paradox an illuminating insight into the unity of being which transcends categories; rather, he betrays an uncertainty of vision which undercuts the assertions contained in each sonnet.

In 50 Poems (1940), as in No Thanks, sonnets comprise roughly a quarter of the volume (18 of 50). And, as in both Viva and No Thanks, they reflect the general concerns of the volume, although here they are not organized as regularly as before. The satirical and worldly sonnets are again found among the early poems, and the later sonnets deal with "clean" or transcendental topics. However, transcendental elements pervade the volume as a whole, and the sonnets reflect this pattern; transcendence is a topic of several of the volume's early sonnets.

The first sonnet of 50 Poems presents a spectacular combination of experimental technique and traditional structure.

am was. are leaves few this. is these a or
scratchily over which of earth dragged once
-ful leaf. & were who skies clutch an of poor
how colding hereless. air theres what immense
live without every dancing. singless on-
ly a child's eyes float silently down
more than two those that and that noing our
gone snow gone

yours mine

. We're

alive and shall be: cities may overflow (am
was) assassinating whole grassblades, five
ideas can swallow a man; three words im-
-prison a woman for all her now; but we've
such freedom such intense digestion so
much greenness only dying makes us grow

Here in #5 (CP 491), the poet consoles his lady's fear of death, symbolized by winter, and instructs her in the nature of their transcendental being. He begins by observing the deathful condition of the natural world (ll. 1-5); it is late autumn or winter, and the world seems dead ("am was"). The wind drags fallen leaves across the frozen ground. All dimension and outline seem lost; all that remains is a "bareless" region surrounded by immense expanses of "empty sky." All signs of vitality - dancing, singing - seem absent until the poet discovers that he and his lady are not alone in the barren landscape; a child also watches the scene. To the speaker, the child's silent contemplation of the cycle of natural seasons, neither ecstatic nor sorrowful but simply accepting, seems a miracle and has the effect, he says, of "noing" (i.e. negating) their fear of death and time as well as their egoism. They are reborn; the speaker emphasizes their new collective life in the present by saying "we're."

Having learned from the child that rebirth and growth require the acceptance of death, the speaker now explores and defines for the lady the nature of their new dispensation. They have not only escaped the "world of cities, ideas, and words (all unnatural, manmade abstractions and constructs)" to become at home in nature, they have also grown into the true, timeless world of dream by accepting and submitting themselves to the cycle of life and death in the phenomenal. As Friedman says, "the 'dying' refers ... to the surrender of the routine world and the abstract categories it imposes upon the natural world, for fall is as much a part of the cycle of growth to the transcendentalist as is spring" (The Growth, p. 128).

This sonnet is instructive not only because it indicates Cummings' increasing belief in the necessity of embracing temporal existence, but also because the poet embodies his insight in a revolutionary rhetoric fully appropriate to his thought. Combining distortions of normal word order and grammar with a careful use of the period in the early lines, Cummings creates an "atomistic syntax" which reflects the spiritual fragmentation of the speaker and his lady as they view a world which seems itself to have become empty, dead, and fragmented - as they discover themselves strangers in a strange wasteland.¹ The syntax becomes more regular and the fragmentation ceases as they become aware of the child's eyes calmly taking in the winter scene that so disturbs them (ll. 6-8). Just as their apprehension of the child's acceptance of the cycle of nature brings about their spiritual restoration and re-ordering, so their perception of the world, reflected in the poet's description, gradually becomes more orderly; the world flows together without interruption or fragmentation until they arrive at the moment of rebirth. Then, the "noing" of their fear and egoism having been effected, a period is put to their old lives ("yours mine.") and a new sentence, a new life, begun. This new state is described in normal word order and punctuated with commas, semicolons, and colons. The syntax reflects the orderliness and consistency of vision which they have gained, and the substitution of linking punctuation for periods suggests the larger unifying vision that has replaced their fragmented perceptions.

¹"Atomistic syntax" is Friedman's term; see The Growth, p. 130.

Furthermore, the absence of final punctuation in line fourteen supports the speaker's affirmation that they are "alive/and shall be" without end.

#16 (CP 502) is very much like #5 in technique and theme. It is surely one of Cummings' most difficult poems, and it is nearly impossible to be more precise than to say that this sonnet records a moment when the speaker, finding himself amidst a landscape wherein death seems to reign utterly, discovers that natural beauty, and therefore transcendental release, exists in death.

)when what hugs stopping earth than silent is
more silent than more than much more is or
total sun oceaning than any this
tear jumping from each most least eye of star

and without was if minus and shall be
immeasurable happenless unnow
shuts more than open could that very tree
or than all life more death begins to grow

end's ending then these dolls of joy and grief
these recent memories of future dream
these perhaps who have lost their shadows if
which did not do the losing spectres mime

until out of merely not nothing comes
only one snowflake(and we speak our names

The difficulty in reading this sonnet derives from Cummings' use of inordinately atomistic syntax. He heaps up words and phrases without benefit of syntactical or punctuational clergy; he neither marries his words and phrases with clarifying punctuation nor orders them according to standard usage. Friedman compares this technique to pointillisme and suggests that by letting each word or phrase retain an unusual degree of freedom of meaning, a "transcendental intensity" of impression is created rather than a specific rendering of scene and idea (The Growth, p. 131).

One violates the poem, then, by forcing it to conform to an imposed order, by supplying a scheme of punctuation or rearranging the phrasing in order to make the poem mean. That is doing what Cummings often inveighs against: reducing a mystery through the application of oversimplifying, analytical reason. One may, however, note some of the general elements which compose the field of meaning. It seems to be winter, with snow covering the ground and the trees utterly lifeless. There is no wind; the silence seems absolute. The sun is shining brightly but without force: the people "have lost their shadows." Time seems to stand still, creating a "happenless unnow" wherein no action seems possible. One senses complete stasis. The inhabitants of this wasteland, including the speaker and his lady, are paralyzed "dolls of joy and grief," who were once perhaps fully alive but who now can only "mime" the "losing spectres" of those dead souls who never were alive, who "did not do." In this moment, all of nature seems on the brink of absolute dissolution; it is at "end's ending."

The spiritual desolation of the poet and the corresponding motionlessness of the physical scene end in the concluding couplet with the arrival "out of merely not nothing" of a single snowflake and the resulting spiritual rebirth of the speaker and lady. The miraculous appearance of beauty in this deathful landscape redeems them from their spectre state, and enables them to speak their "names," to live again. It is fitting that their restoration be expressed by restored, normal syntax.

Both this sonnet and #5 end with a recognition that death is an organic element of life; where the former poem emphasizes the necessity

of accepting natural cycles, this sonnet acknowledges the beneficence of nature in supplying a sign that rebirth is inherent in nature and available to those who live in harmony with it.

I believe the significant development in 50 Poems is Cummings' emphasis on the necessity of living in the phenomenal. He seems to have gone beyond the idea that death must be endured, even embraced, for transcendence to be attained; he has grown to understand that one must also embrace life.

This concept is particularly apparent in #43 (CP 531), where Cummings affirms his faith that one must submit himself joyously to life in the phenomenal world, embracing both "pleasure and pain" if one is to transcend (cf. Stetler, pp. 89-90). For most people, hate is the dominant emotion; they hate what they are and what they have because they desire only what is "green and young" and seek only pleasure. Consequently, their hate generates abstractions which they seek to realize in future time; it creates philosophical, political, and theological systems which promise to eliminate "winter" but retain "spring." But most people also fear the future, for it means change and death. Driven by their hatred to seek escape from the intolerable present and fearful of "tomorrow," which they fear will bury them in "woe," most people turn to "yesterday" - the past - for consolation and security. Changeless and known, the past is their only refuge when the present and future are unacceptable. Unfortunately for them, events in the passage of time continually intrude on them, dragging them from their foetal sanctuary. Unable to find a tolerable life, it is no wonder their "hate blows a bubble of despair."

Most people err in conceiving and treating life as separable, in believing that pleasure and pain are discontinuous antinomies. The poet, seeing deeper, knows pleasure and pain to be "merely surfaces/ (one itself showing, itself hiding one)." Like a coin, life is double in aspect, single in essence; it cannot be had or spent except as a whole. The man who seeks a life of timeless, changeless pleasure (a "neverless now") and "spring" will be given "nothing" by "madame death." In seeking a half life, he gets none at all. Moreover, he surrenders his chance to grow through death to transcendence.

To redeem himself, man needs, in Auden's words, "new styles of architecture, a change of heart." He needs to relearn how to see and accept life as a whole; he needs to "love" what is in the moment, accepting both pleasure and pain, winter as well as spring. He must accept that life means death and change, and surrender his egoistic will to power over life. Only through love can one accept the nothing of death and sing, knowing that death too is a "surface."

#31 (CP 517), one of three sonnet-portraits in the volume, praises a friend whose transcendence is complete and miraculous. The speaker's friend's life is so astonishing that timelessness itself "floats/at ... the ecstatic ease" with which it "stands." Moreover, the friend is a spiritual guide of sorts, capable of rescuing the speaker and other feeling persons from unbalancing excesses of emotion ("undering joy and overing grief"); "nothing arrives" but the friend - "a so prodigious am/ a so immediate is" - escorts them "home/through never's always." That is, he redeems them from an illusory preoccupation with future events, teaching them to be at home in the present until they utterly forget

their fear of change and death (which is a "guess," another illusion).

While timelessness exists beyond time, it is, paradoxically, approachable only through the temporal. Timelessness grows out of time as a tree grows skyward from the earth; it is "anchored in what mounting roots/of mere eternity," but transcends those mountains, "discoverably disappearing." Furthermore, to attain transcendence one must live wholly in and for the present; one must be an "am" or "is" to climb the tree. That means abandoning one's hope for a better future (which would be, of course, in time) and finding a "home" in the now. Also, Cummings implies that transcendent timelessness is not a static, fixed condition, but rather a dynamic realm of "if," of infinite possibility of becoming. Consequently, growth does not end with transcendence; for the speaker's friend, who seems already completely transcendent, timelessness is a "fingery treesoul" which continually "queries" from him "not suspected selves."

Another indomitable soul is portrayed in #20 (CP 506). The speaker describes an arthritic old woman, who, on her sickbed, gives him a momentary glimpse of transcendental equanimity in the face of earthly pain. In spite of being grotesquely deformed and wracked with agony, the woman thanks her visitor with a "small grin" and a "trembling look" that have the "splendor of an angel's fart!"¹ Such graciousness and simplicity from one so battered by illness is a revelation to the speaker,

¹The grotesque analogy here intensifies the wonder of the old woman's indomitability in the face of physical collapse.

who discovers in her thanks the gesture of a soul with "more simplicity than makes a world."

The other portrait in the sonnets of 50 Poems is #35 (CP 522). Here, however, the speaker prays for the redemption of a friend who has all the attributes required for transcendental life except love. The poet asks that "stern particular love" may come to one who has otherwise lived with "absolute courage" and lift him from the phenomenal into the world of dream. The friend has lived joyously and self-reliantly; he is capable of grinning "three smiles into a dead house," clutching "between eyes emptiness," and doing "more ... than today can guess/or fears to dare whatever dares to fear." Yet, in the speaker's eyes the friend is a "which" or unalive thing. The speaker prays that love may "surround" his friend's "trite/how terrible selfhood" and lift him "from sharp soft worms/of spiralling why out of black because." Only then will the friend become truly living - a "who." Lacking love, the friend is only a partial being; he lives only in the phenomenal unworld of "why" and "because." He requires love to be redeemed from his death-in-life and to become whole, to have "hands and feet" added to his "legs and arms."

The transcendental power of love is the theme of the final sonnet of the volume, #50 (CP 538). Through a series of rhetorical questions and answers, the poet defines for his lady the special freedom which love confers on lovers.

He begins by asking "what freedom's not some under's mere above/ but breathing yes which fear will never no?" He desires to know the freedom that cannot be taken away because fear "makes oppression more

tolerable than the thing feared" (Stetler, p. 91). What freedom dares to say "yes" in the face of absolute terror? The freedom conferred by love; love alone, as Cummings said in #43, frees one from fear and hate. Love alone allows one to accept life; consequently, love's "doom is beauty, and its fate to grow." The speaker wonders further, "shall hate confound the wise?doubt blind the brave?/does mask wear face?have singings gone to say?" Not for lovers, for in love, "youngest selves yet younger selves conceive/here's music's music and the day of day." Still he persists: "are worlds collapsing?" Has the past become a refuge, a "glove" to insulate us from the world? Do men look to the future for salvation? And he answers that because they love, he and his lady are the "actual either hand," touching love because they accept it unafraid. Because they love in the present, giving themselves wholly to life, they stand on "forever's very now." Finally, the poet reminds his lady that whatever occurs in life, even if a "first rose explodes," it "shall increase whole truthful immediate us." Through their love, they have become free to grow; they accept life to attain transcendence.

Cummings' middle period is marked by poems which find proofs and symbols of transcendence in natural scenes. In 50 Poems, the cycle of the seasons evidences the promise of transcendental rebirth. In No Thanks, the poet found proofs of rebirth in the cycle of night and day. #18 of 50 Poems (CP 504) also interprets an aspect of nature. Here the speaker and his lady watch a bat ("Chauvesouris") dart quickly and crazily in a clear moonlit sky. The poet "reads" in the bat's movements a missive from the moon.

Beginning "dearest we" and "covering/one complete miracle of

nearest far," the moon's letter is an invitation to transcendental union:
"i cordially invite me to become/noone except yourselves rsvp." ¹ Always
a symbol of transcendental self-sufficiency to Cummings, the moon offers
herself completely. To attain transcendence, the speaker and his lady
must respond to nature's gift; they must accept the moon's invitation
and open themselves to life. That is, the speaker says that their "time"
becomes "forever" (timelessness) when they surrender themselves to na-
ture and accept that the "place" of transcendence is "now." To become
the moon, to find unity in and with the world of dream, they must, like
the moon, abandon knowing and grammar and concentrate on "being" in the
moment. This done, the lady will become the moon and wear her "silver
shoes."²

Cummings' friend in #35 was trapped by his need to know "why," to
reduce life, as he has been taught to do, to simple schemes of cause
and effect. The dangers of relying on "mind" are the subject of #40
(CP 528), where the speaker asks himself whether society or the indi-

¹Stetler says the letter is from the poet to himself and tells him
to find transcendence by being truly himself (p. 82). This reading ig-
nores the description of the moon and bat. He does point out, however,
that "ecco" suggests both the Latin for "behold!" ("ecce") and "echo"
(in its Middle English spelling). Both meanings are appropriate to my
reading: the speaker wants his lady, and of course the reader, to see
the bat's movements as a letter, and he also wants her to echo the
letter, to let "the meaning of the letter ... reverbrate within" (p. 82).

²Cummings is probably echoing the phrase "silver shoon" in Walter
de la Mare's poem "Silver."

vidual consciousness shall guide our lives. Will mankind, a "people-shaped toomany-ness,"

 tell us who we are and will
 it tell us why we dream and will it tell
 us how we drink crawl eat walk die fly do?

Or will we ourselves "steer" our "doom" strictly by our own wills, "a notalive undead toonearishness"? Cummings' rhetoric clearly tells us that neither of these is the answer to living rightly. Both the will of the mass and the egocentric will are false guides. But of the two, the greater danger is the ego. To rely solely on one's own desire and will, to know oneself and live therefrom, is fraught with spiritual danger, for "all knowing's having and to have is ... perhaps the very unkindest way to kill each of those creatures called one's self." Because to know is to limit and control, to kill and preserve, the speaker imagines that he must simply let things be; he must say "yes" to life if he is to become himself. To say "yes" is to accept one's "doom" and "oneselves" as they flower and evolve.

The satirical sonnets of 50 Poems might more properly be considered outraged invectives rather than ordinary, morally instructive criticisms of social vice. For instance, #24 (CP 510) is a biting, hateful attack on mostpeople - the great mass of soulless, unalive, thinking humanity - for whom living means merely breathing. Asking how they should "be" when they were not given hearts, the speaker damns them in order to dramatize the prospects for transcendence he and his lady have as a consequence of their love. Unlike mostpeople, who in all their "hundreds upon thousands" might be multiplied by "twice infinity" yet never equal one soul, the poet and his lady, who both have a "million

selves," are capable of becoming one soul and attaining wholeness in transcendence (where "every sun goes round its moon") because of the only "mystery of love."

#28 (CP 514) is likewise an angry invective against "mankind," "civilization," and the fatuous expectation of finding more than "2½ or impossibly 3" individuals "every several fat/thousand years." In a sense berating himself for his "dumb" hopes, the speaker admonishes himself to remember that the passage of time does not perforce bring progress, that "the number of times a wheel turns/doesn't determine its roundness." He instructs himself: "if swallows tryst/in your barn be glad;nobody ever earns/anything,everything little looks big in a mist." He realizes that he must remember to live and delight in nature, to not expect to get anything because he has done something, and to beware of the illusory problems of the phenomenal world. And finally, with an oath in the name of one archetypal individual - Christ - he swears to "kiss a stalinist arse/in hitler's window" if occurs something "more small" (negligible, evil) than "all mankind" or "more distorting than socalled civilization."

Like many of the poems in this volume, this sonnet reflects Cummings' hatred of the collectivities that were a plague to the civilized world in 1940. His certainty that life is good only when every man is allowed to exercise his individuality to the fullest explains the violence of his condemnation of "mankind" and "civilization." These are the catchphrases of demagogues and tyrants who would reduce all men to units in a "state." Any group or ideology which in the name of a higher good demands the surrender of freedom is abhorrent to Cummings, for

they offer the unwary a sanctioned haven from choice, an opportunity to escape the process of self-discovery.

Cummings' anger in these two sonnets is something new in his poetry. In No Thanks, modern man was at least a foetus with the potential to attain maturity; here, however, he is a nothing absolutely without redeeming feature. The cause of Cummings' hardening of heart is not clear. It might be the pique of a radical who has failed to create new styles of architecture, or it might be the anger born of sheer despair. Norman Friedman finds it Cummings' main weakness, but suggests that "the spiritual ideal needs the ordinary world as an arena in which to fulfill itself" (see The Growth, p. 7 ff.). I find it partly a function of Cummings' increasing worldliness; as he discovers that transcendence is approachable only through the natural, he becomes more bitterly aware of the failures of most people to live rightly in the world. The world had gone mad by 1940, and Cummings must have felt his indictments mild in the context of a world in flames. His occasional failure to transform the unlove of the world is not a failure of vision so much as a failure of morale.

In lxl (1944), a little more than a quarter of the poems (14 of 54) are sonnets, and they are again arranged to provide a structure of recognizably traditional forms which counterbalance the experimental and impressionistic pieces in the volume. Again the satirical sonnets, and most of the satirical poems in the volume, are found in the first half, and the latter sonnets are primarily transcendental. However, as in 50 Poems, transcendental poems are found throughout the volume.

If any one of Cummings' sonnets may be said to contain the essence of his transcendental stance, it must surely be #16 of lxl (CP 556). Examined by most of Cummings' major critics, this poem is particularly significant as a reflection of Cummings' evolving conceptions of life, death, and transcendence.

one's not half two. It's two are halves of one:
which halves reintegrating, shall occur
no death and any quantity; but than
all numerable mosts the actual more

minds ignorant of stern miraculous
this every truth-beware of heartless them
(given the scalpel, they dissect a kiss;
or, sold the reason, they undream a dream)

one is the song which fiends and angels sing:
all murdering lies by mortals told make two.
Let liars wilt, repaying life they're loaned;
we (by a gift called dying born) must grow

deep in dark least ourselves remembering
love only rides his year.

All lose, whole find

Essentially didactic, the poet here instructs his audience that the transcendental realm is a unity, and that those who love and submit themselves to life in the phenomenal find "no death and any quantity, but than/all numerable mosts the actual more." Friedman points out that the key metaphors here are mathematical; "one" stands for the condition of transcendence, "two" for the multiplicity of phenomenal existence (The Growth, p. 136; cf. Stetler, p. 96). In order to attain oneness or transcendence, the "halves" of one must be reintegrated. This is achieved through love and "dying." We must surrender our insulating egoism (the ego must die) to be reborn. Paradoxically, we do not suffer "death," the complete annihilation of self, but rather, as Cline says, the "ex-

pansion of the self" through complete meeting with the other, through love (p. 62).

The speaker also warns those who until now have been "ignorant" of the truth that "one's not half two," to beware of those who are heartless and who dissect life analytically, searching for reasons. They are anti-transcendental makers of division who, by searching for components, deny wholeness and create "murdering lies" which destroy our dreams, our intuited apprehensions of transcendence.

Finally, Cummings says we must ignore those who have chosen to live by reason; we must let the "liars wilt, remembering love only rides his year." That is, love alone is capable of allowing us to master and transcend the world of time and multiplicity. Only as we reach out "to things or people of God in a superfluity of love" will we be able to "all lose, whole find."¹ There is a strong sexual theme in this sonnet, and in one sense the poem is addressed to the speaker's lover as a seduction poem. As Cline points out in the course of discussing the poems allusions to Plato's Symposium, the "image of mutual interpenetration carries direct sexual connotations" and "Cummings' love is a fusion of the mind and flesh of two people, the relationship of 1x1" (p. 63). For Cummings as for Plato, sexual congress can be the mortal analogue to and metaphor for spiritual union with the transcendental realm of to kalon. George Haines, also touching on the sexual element, says: "here is no possibility of confusing love with sensual pleasure alone; here is the more one could hardly glimpse in his earlier work.

¹Cline, p. 63.

And the concluding lines contain the essence of that quotation from Saint John, 'Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abideth by itself alone, but if it die, it beareth much fruit,' the truth of which, as Harry Levin noted in James Joyce,¹ has been discovered by so many writers of the last half century." The poet, then, finds transcendence through complete submission to the pleasures and pains of life; love comprehends both sexual and spiritual dying, for transcendence comprehends both physical and spiritual being.

Haines' reference to Levin's remark should be noted, for Cummings has too often been labelled escapist and immature. Here his belief in the necessity of life and struggle reflects his growing maturity and places him in the mainstream of literary thought in our time.

In #36 (CP 576), Cummings explores the relation of lovers and love to time. For lovers, "each happening of their hearts" is a timeless, infinite fusion with transcendence. Each spiritual event is a breakthrough into "forever" and "everywhere." Hence, even though they are physically subject to time, they "live longer" - infinitely longer - "than all which and every who," than mere matter or non-lovers. Since love encompasses all being, any "now" or moment of love is also "forever," and any "here is "everywhere." The passage of time in the phenomenal world, then, is irrelevant to lovers, who have found eternity in an hour. Mostpeople, on the other hand, either fear the changes that time brings or hope for them. For mostpeople, what they have in the present moment,

¹George Haines IV, "2:1: The World and E. E. Cummings," Sewanee Review, LIX (1951), pp. 222-223.

their past accomplishments, is either utterly precious or utterly intolerable; the fearful cling to what they have, and the hopeful reach out for a better future. To the poet, both are "falsest" views of life and fantastical figments of "mere mind's poor pretend-grim comics of duration." Only love is uncreated and antecedent, and love is beyond time.

True lovers are beyond fear and hope because they have grown to accept whatever is; they have learned to say yes to life. Cosmic cataclysm cannot shake them; it can only make them more true. Even if time should go to wrack, asking "into his was/all shall," they "would never miss a yes."

The world of time and "knowledge" and the lover's relations thereto are the subject of #39 (CP 579), which aims at instructing and heartening the poet's lady (cf. Friedman, The Growth, p. 137). Mostpeople - "every madge and mable dick and dave" - exist in a winter world of intellect and reason. Here, "ignorance" is an intolerable condition, so, like children at play, mostpeople plunge joyfully into knowledge: "all ignorance toboggans into know." However, as Stetler points out, "the pursuit of knowledge is as futile as the circularity of tobogganing; as soon as mostpeople discover their knowledge is incomplete and unsatisfactory, they trudge 'up to ignorance again'" (p. 108). Knowing that "winter's not forever," the poet wonders what mostpeople would do "if spring should spoil the game," if true reality were to break through, making the knowledge game impossible.

For the speaker, "all history" has been merely "a winter sport or three." Mankind has been moving from ignorance to knowledge and back

again always. But history is "too small" to contain the speaker and "exceedingly too small" for him and his lady together. For them, the coming of spiritual spring has exposed the game. Having established the triviality and futile circularity of history's game of knowledge, the speaker dismisses the "shrill collective myth" that knowledge means progress, and assures his lady, as Friedman says, that they live "in a totally different world and hence are beyond the clutches of history. They live in a timeless world whose address is tomorrow; that is, a world of infinite potentiality, as opposed to the limited historical world of the past" (The Growth, p. 138).

Moreover, should it happen that mostpeople manage to "find" the lovers' new address, if they should interfere with the lovers again, another and still better world exists for the poet and his lady. That is "now," the unfettered present. Incapable of existing in "ignorance," mostpeople cannot accept the present; hence the poet and his lady, who have become capable of bearing and accepting "ignorance," will be safe and whole in the timeless present.

#52 (CP 592), the last sonnet of lxl, expresses some truths the poet has learned in the course of striving for transcendence. He has discovered that "life is more true than reason will deceive/(more secret or than madness did reveal)." He has found that to reason about life is to lie about it, and learned that to believe reason can reveal life's secrets is madness. Reason is, to Cummings, a species of insanity, for it distorts life by abstraction and exclusion. The poet has further learned that "life is deeper than lose;higher than have." Life is more than positions and possessions, for what is owned may be lost; but true

life is beyond "loss" or "have." He has discovered that transcendental beauty exists even beyond life: "beauty is more each than living's all/ multiplied with infinity sans if" (cf. Stetler, p. 113). Mankind's mightiest meditations are utterly "cancelled" by the simplest transcendental beauty, for in transcendence "less than nothing" is "more than everything" in the derived world. Living, timeless beauty confounds time: if a "littler bird than eyes can learn/look up to silence and completely sing/futures are obsolete;pasts are unborn."

Finally, the poet knows now that death is an illusion which ends only what mostpeople call men. Beauty "outlasts the grave" and so do those souls who have, through transcendence, ceased to be "men," subject to death. Certain that death is a transition rather than a conclusion, the speaker selflessly praises life and beauty, for in them he has found the doorway into dream.

Three of the transcendental sonnets of lxl are monuments to moments of transcendental illumination. #18 (CP 558), for example, "shows the speaker making the transition from one world to the next...", "from the "hell" of the unworld of time into the whereless "paradise" of "eternal now" (Friedman, The Growth, p. 136).

Transcendence here is a state copresent with the phenomenal; the poet has attained a spiritual rebirth without physical death. He is leaving behind in the phenomenal "a perfectly distinct unhe;/a ticking phantom by prodigious time's/mere brain contrived:a spook of stop and go." The speaker's desire is to achieve something more - "another steepest thing"; he desires to grow into a "being so very born no bird can sing/as easily creation up all sky." He wants to become so inno-

cently and enthusiastically open to the totality of all creation that his ecstatic participation in the life of all will surpass even the paeans of the most naturally transcendent creatures.

The last two lines of the sonnet are a tossed-off parting remark to the world he is leaving. The speaker facetiously asks the world to "do the breathing" for him while he is away. Having found transcendence, he no longer fears his mortality, although he implies he is still subject to physical death. Spiritually he dwells in "eternal now" among "not numerable ams," although his body belongs to time.

This poem betrays an unresolved element in Cummings' conception of life and death. While it is easy for him to philosophically repudiate the finality of death for transcendent souls, it is harder to live absolutely fearless of death. This sonnet implies that the speaker will return from transcendence, perhaps called back by death. Although he will have attained timelessness, he implies he is still subject to death. The ambiguity of the poet's position indicates that Cummings is still in the process of exploring the ramifications of his stance toward death and transcendence.

Both #32 (CP 572) and #42 (CP 582) describe moments when the poet and his lady discover their transcendental rebirth. #32, like #18 of 50 Poems, finds the poet asking his lady if she has recognized the transcendental potentialities symbolized by the moon. #42 celebrates the transforming effect of a sunrise, finding it an "impossible miracle" that is "more than all real, all imagining." In rising, the sun "uplifts" himself from "night's terrors." This star of stars has miraculously transcended death and fear, through his own agency, to bring "earth's

arrival" and to make it a "blossoming sphere." Witnessing this, the poet is inspired to ask who he and his lady really are. In the dawn of this new day, they are "not i not you" - that is, no longer isolated mortals - "nor any breathing creature." Rather, transfigured by their recognition of the sun's miraculous rebirth, which is like moonrise symbolic of the rebirth inherent in all of nature, they too become "a blossoming sphere." Redeemed from "night's not eternal terrors," they have transcended the barriers of self to become a single, flourishing entity.

As Cummings' understanding of life, love, death, and transcendence matures, it becomes increasingly difficult to isolate the several strands of his thought and yet do justice to all. Most of the "clean" sonnets of lxl, for instance, deal with love as well as transcendence. If he does not speak directly of love or its power, Cummings assumes love as an a priori condition. For example, #36 presumes that the speaker and his lady are in love but does not dilate on love so much as the way most people and lovers live in time. #19 (CP 559), on the other hand, is a fairly typical love sonnet which again praises the lady's transcendental power (cf. Friedman, The Growth, p. 136).

In this sonnet, the speaker focuses on the power of her silence, voice, and motionlessness to raise him to self-discovery. Her silence brings "miracle peace" and causes "all angry common things to disappear" as a snowfall brings a blanketing peace to a winter world. He says her voice wakes him from a kind of spiritual sleep, in which he only dreams of transcendence, to a waking life of dream, and through her he discovers himself, "a stranger who is i." Like her silence, her motion-

lessness renders nature insignificant and still; in her presence, "no single thing dares partly seem/one atomy once, and every cannot stir/imagining." Yet, as Stetler points out, "the lady's motionlessness contains movement that is growth; it is 'more april than the year'," even if April's "first little flowers rise/out of tremendous darkness into air" (p. 98).

For Cummings, the lady takes dominion everywhere. She takes over nature's power to facilitate his transcendence. A natural creature herself, she synecdochically rises above her role as a single thing to become all. What allows her to do this is her human capacity to love and be loved by the poet; she is an active force, nature a passive. She has become a mediating daemon who allows the poet to move into timelessness.

The nature of love is defined in #34 (CP 574) as "nothing false and possible" but rather "imagined, therefore limitless." Love is another name for transcendence: "a universe beyond obey/or command, reality or un-." The essence of love is giving and selflessly accepting; because love is imagined and limitless, it is beyond definition and can be expressed only through what Stetler calls "algebraic proposition": "love's to giving as to keeping's have/as yes is to if, love is to yes" (p. 103).

As lovers, the poet and his lady are "depth's above why's first because" and "heights below faith's last doubt." They have transcended the phenomenal world of cause and effect (which are illusions contrived by man), where whatever happens must be analyzed and explained. They have learned to submit to life "humbly," and they pray only that they may "continue to outgrow" themselves - to surpass the "mosts" that they,

as individuals, have achieved - in order to "guess" the "least" that they have found, through love, as a single transcendent being. As they did in #32, the speaker and his lady have moved into a new dimension of being through love; they are no longer "you" and "i" but "we," ready to begin a new cycle of growth and self-discovery.

#37 (CP 577) is also a love poem, extravagantly praising the love the poet shares with his lady. It is interesting to note that in this love sonnet the poet implies that their love is not so much a consequence or product of their actions as it is a preexisting condition into which they have entered. The speaker says of love that "this creature never known/complexity was born before the moon/before God wished himself into a rose" and even "before/each heartbeat." As a result of their incorporation into love, "no doing shall undo" them. They have moved beyond "madness" and mere death; they are now ever alive and growing.

Cummings, unlike Wallace Stevens or William Carlos Williams, does not often specifically explore the nature and function of art and the artist in his work (Cummings' play Him is an obvious exception). Some of his love sonnets are traditional promises to give his mistress literary immortality (e.g. CP 83, 372), but few deal directly with the artist and his work (CP 208, 306, 437). For Cummings, the artist is apparently but one sort of transcendent man, and all transcendently alive individuals are, in essence, artists. #22 of lxl (CP 562), as Friedman notes, "defines an artist" specifically as a transcendent being (The Growth, p. 156).

no man,if men are gods;but if gods must
be men,the sometimes only man is this
(most common,for each anguish is his grief;
and,for his joy is more than joy,most rare)

a fiend,if fiends speak truth;if angels burn

by their own generous completely light,
an angel;or(as various worlds he'll spurn
rather than fail immeasurable fate)
coward,clown,traitor,idiot,dreamer,beast-

such was a poet and shall be and is

-who'll solve the depths of horror to defend
a sunbeam's architecture with his life:
and carve immortal jungles of despair
to hold a mountain's heartbeat in his hand

The first nine lines of this sonnet are couched in rhetorical, quasi-logical propositions - in "if ... then" structures - which seem to imply that Cummings is trying to discover a definition of the poet but which really function to make the reader apprehend for himself the poet's nature. Cummings knows what a poet is, but like Socrates wishes to lead his reader to discover that definition. Using this tactic, Cummings avoids the trap of overt didacticism and forces the reader to explore the various possibilities of his propositions and terms.

A poet is a man who refuses to believe that man is capable of shaping his own destiny, that "men are gods." Rather, he believes that men contain the power to transcend the phenomenal and regain a godlike perfection. That is, every man is potentially like Christ, truly mortal yet also capable of transcending his own mortality. Like Christ, the poet is "most common," for he identifies himself with all men; their "each anguish is his grief." The poet is also "most rare," for his joy is more than joy; in knowing transcendence he finds transvaluations of

earthly perfection. Furthermore, a poet can be a "fiend," for in his search for truth he may smash the complacent lies that men live and love within. Yet because he lives self-reliantly, demanding nothing of the world, he is an "angel," shedding light that not only he but others may see. The poet may be a "coward, clown, traitor, idiot, dreamer, beast," but only to others who impose on life arbitrary standards of bravery, seriousness, patriotism, intellect and reason, "business," or puritanical morality. The poet, "rather than fail immeasurable fate," rather than allow himself to be something he has not consented to be in a free interaction with life, spurns the "various worlds" contrived by others and chooses only those which realize him.

The most important idea here with regard to transcendentalism is, as Stetler says, how Cummings "envision[s] the poet in action" (p. 103). To be a poet is not merely to assume a stance; it is also to do something. The poet will "solve the depths of horror to defend/a sunbeam's architecture" and "carve immortal jungles of despair/to hold a mountain's heartbeat." He will risk the horror of death; he will cut through despair to find the real, vital heart of transcendence. The poet embraces life, even if it means agony and death, to discover himself.

#6 of 1x1 (CP 546) also treats art and artists, but this sonnet is an amusing and mildly satirical self-portrait of the poet as he discusses "loyaltea" (perhaps that of Ezra Pound, who was making propaganda broadcasts from Italy) at a restaurant table with a literary friend who is being ogled by a woman of wealth, fashion, and "a weakness for living literature." The poet's friend is apparently married to a stupid, possessive woman for whom the friend no longer cares but from whom he seldom

escapes; she is known as his "daughter's mother" (that is, she is connected to him only because they have produced a child together) and has a "zero mind" from which the friend is "infrequently ... exhumed." He may also be a writer whose literary work is in eclipse, who is seldom exhumed by readers or critics. He remains "innocently undecaying" even in his reduced circumstances, yet he stares "at yon guilty ceiling per both pale/orbs," perhaps from guilt at having momentarily escaped his wife but probably because of nervousness at the sight of "a leanderless hero's carnivorous tits." "At the next table but three" sits a woman in a very revealing dress; the friend, an old-fashioned man, may feel guilty at being aware of her "subnakedness" or nervous at her obvious interest in their conversation. The poet implies she is not only an eavesdropper but also "on the make." Both men are disturbed by her intrusive presence; aware and resentful that they are being stared at, they become self-conscious, stiffen, and lose their spontaneity. While his friend seeks refuge in the ceiling decorations, the poet "masturbates/one honest breadcrumb." They try to restore their lost privacy, their psychic space, by fiddling with minutiae. The poet tries to continue the conversation, but knowing they will be overheard, he becomes wooden and contrived - a character in a bad drawing-room comedy. He feels he has sold himself to the woman by continuing the charade she has forced them into.

While one might find this sonnet a parable of the influence of money or "society" on the world of art, I think the poem is significant because it shows that Cummings was an acute observer of human behavior as well as nature. The sonnet is a psychologically true portrait of the way people really behave.

The remaining three sonnets of lxl are harsh invectives against those who would peddle simple solutions to the problems of life and those who seek for easy answers. #9 (CP 549) attacks not only those who sell "snakeoil" and "vacuumcleaners" to an unwary public but also those who would sell "democracy" and "subhuman rights." #14 (CP 554) attacks those who believe in science and the idea of progress through scientific solutions. #15 (CP 555) blasts those who cry for someone else to "save the world."

The key to understanding Cummings' vitriolic denunciation of salesmen in #9, whether "it's president of the you were say/or a jennelman name misder finger" (Uncle Sam?), is to recall that he believes that an individual must make his own life; he must shape his own doom by continually and freely interacting with the world. Out of this dialectic is born a continually growing soul. If the individual surrenders his freedom to choose, if he allows his life to be made for him by others, he is giving up that which makes him alive and capable of growing into transcendental harmony. Salesmen of any sort intrude into this process. Uninvited, they seek to control the individual's life, to turn him into a consumer of their particular products or ideas. Hence, to Cummings, "a salesman is an it that stinks."

The worst salesmen are those who would peddle ideas, who would provide everyone with prepackaged social or political schemes, for they offer a product that is easy and often morally attractive to accept. Since making one's life is a hard and exacting process, most people are easily tempted to adopt someone else's political, social, or moral codes. It is one thing to say "no" to a man peddling strawberries; it

is quite another to deny the President as he calls for a New Deal or to Uncle Sam as he calls for patriotism and sacrifice. It is much simpler and easier to abdicate one's individuality when social ostracism or persecution are promised to those who refuse to buy "democracy" or "sub-human rights." The salesmen of such products are the most vile because they contrive situations where people find it nearly impossible to grow into themselves.

But it is not only the salesmen who are dangerous; the products they push may be harmful. Cummings wants the reader to beware of democracy and human rights. His warning here is of a piece with his condemnation; both democracy and human rights require the individual to sacrifice his life-decisions to the will of the mass. They require a surrender of liberty and responsibility, a surrender that is intolerable for the poet, who is unconcerned with the moral goodness of the product. In the context of the war years, this is a heroic affirmation of Cummings' philosophy.

#15 ridicules the "microscopic shriekings" of "those insects" who call for someone else to preserve their selfish little worlds. Because they would buy willingly from the salesmen, they are doomed to annihilation, to "exactly nothing." Because they demand that the world conform to their desires, they are to bewail their fate until they vanish into non-being or "un"-ness.

The sestet saves this poem from simple meanness by providing the reader with a natural example of the proper way to live transcendently. Essentially, the poet says one must humbly and selflessly accept the will of "god." Unlike men, the mountain described here submits to the

cycle of nature, specifically to winter and death. Although his "maples" weep in fear, the mountain makes no demands for safety or salvation; it simply asks if god has something further it "can do or be." It accepts the answer and finds a new life; although his "maples wept," "his pines lifted their green lives and smiled." The maples, suggestive of phenomenal life because they are deciduous, must die for the evergreen, transcendental pines to show forth.

In #14, like #9 a widely-anthologized sonnet, Cummings again attacks those who embrace false conceptions or myths of life, specifically those who believe in the idea of progress through science. He warns us not to pity "this busy monster manunkind" because it has made man the center and measure of the universe. Because man has embraced the idea that he can make a better life in the future through the application of reason, he has become divorced from life in the real present and exists, "safely beyond death and life," in an unworld of his own creation - "a world of made" - where

electrons deify one razorblade
into a mountainrange;lenses extend
unwish through curving wherewhen till unwish
returns on its unself.

We may pity that which is natural, a part of the "world of born," but never egocentric manunkind: "this/fine specimen of hypermagical/ultraomnipotence." The poet invites us, his fellow "doctors," to give up the "hopeless case" and leave with him for the "good universe next door." He wants us to abandon the contrived unworld and move over, and back into, the natural - to heal ourselves of the disease of progress and live again by giving up our illusion that we can shape the world.

A version of the sexual metaphor for transcendental union appears in this sonnet. Manunkind, in rejecting the natural world of born and creating his own world of made, performs an unnatural act of spiritual and intellectual self-love. Turned inward and away from life, he "plays with the bigness of his littleness." His onanism is a voluntary repudiation of life which is not to be pitied; because he has placed himself beyond the pale of life, we are no longer required to love him as an element of nature, only to leave him and save ourselves.

The striking thing about the sonnets of lxl is their consistency of vision. In speaking of one sonnet, one seems to speak of all. Cummings seems now to have accounted for all the elements of existence: mostpeople, lovers, death, nature, and transcendence. No longer do we sense that these elements contend with each other; they have become parts of a whole.

Still, one feels now and again in these sonnets a slightly discordant note. That is, Cummings does not always seem perfectly at ease with his vision. For example, in #39 he betrays a hatred for mostpeople which is not adequately accounted for; he says that even if they should abandon "progress" and discover sanity, he and his lady would still have nothing to do with them. His attitude toward physical death is also ambiguous; he remains uncertain of the finality or contingency of physical dissolution, seeking refuge in the paradox of timelessness in time.

What we have learned from these sonnets is that Cummings has learned to accept life in the phenomenal one event at a time - one by one. He has completely abandoned the idea of escape to a separate transcendental life, and learned that transcendence is available only through life in

the phenomenal. He has learned the truth of the axiom that $1 \times 1 = 1$, finding transcendental unity through selfless love in the world of time.

In the time since the publication of No Thanks in 1935, Cummings' lebensphilosophie has changed from a strongly Platonic stance, in which he viewed the world as a corrupt shadow of a separate, higher noumenon, to a monistic position which accepts the copresence and interpenetration of the two realms, and stresses the necessity of living and dying in the phenomenal if one is to obtain the noumenal. A medial position came when he accepted the necessity of dying as the transition between the two realms.

In these middle sonnets, Cummings' conception of the precise nature of the failure of mostpeople became clear. Reason, in reducing external reality to a set of "facts" and relations, is seen as blinding men to the present miracle of nature and transcendence, which are mysteries beyond the power of man to comprehend. False myths, created by society, history, and art, have led man to conceive himself lord of creation, and thereby led him into spiritual bewilderment.

Cummings' conception of love as the mechanism through which the individual not only discovers himself but also attains wholeness in unity with transcendence also evolves in this middle period. Where love was once a personal spiritual and emotional ecstasy, it is now seen as the force binding all of nature into a shining whole.

CHAPTER FOUR THE LATER SONNETS

In Xaipe (1950), as in lxl and 50 Poems, Cummings again distributes the sonnets to provide a more-or-less regular pattern of "traditional" poems, most of them "monuments" of some sort. The sonnets again give the reader a "base" of relatively non-experimental poems from which he may venture safely into the wilds of typographical impressionism and to which he can return for generally explicit instruction. One significant change in pattern does occur; the satirical sonnets are now scattered through the middle of the volume rather than placed at the beginning. And while the distinction between the "dirty" and "clean" poems has been blurred as the poet's vision matures, the former still tend to be found in the first half, and the latter in the second.

The sonnets of Xaipe demonstrate that Cummings' stance toward life, death, love, and transcendence had become firmer and surer in the six years since lxl appeared. The sonnets reflect no radical shifts of position, no instability or revision of lebensphilosophie, yet they affirm an evergrowing certainty that the way one lives vis-à-vis the phenomenal is the sole key to attaining transcendental timelessness.

This tendency is reflected not only by the decrease of satirical poems, but also by the increase in the number of poems which describe and respond to natural scenes and to specific, transcendently alive individuals. That is, Cummings has become more interested in the lives

of those who live rightly than in damning those who pervert themselves and others. The satirical sonnets now appear almost afterthoughts or reminders of what most people do in contrast to the transcendent.

One of the striking developments of Xaipe is Cummings' interest in specific, transcendently alive individuals. Portraits are not new to Cummings; indeed, from the beginning one of his frequent poetic interests has been the description and interpretation of the lives and attitudes of men. In his early volumes, he even "names" the whores he describes (although we suspect he chose their names himself). But he has never before named or written about "real" people - persons of whom the reader would know; his earlier portraits of indomitable souls were, in a sense, abstractions. Now he names names: Peter Munro Jack, Ford Madox Ford, Aristide Maillol.

#7 of Xaipe (CP 605) is a delightful elegy for the well-known literary critic Peter Munro Jack. In the manner of a toast given at a memorial dinner or wake, Cummings wittily praises Jack's critical technique and acumen, notes his prodigious capacity for strong drink, and lauds his "3ringbrain" and "circusheart." He says his friend's death was so unexpected and quick, like a magnificent trapeze performance that leaves the audience's eyes "two dim disks of stare," that he is "still wondering if the stunt was really a dream." Raising his glass, Cummings closes: "here's, wherever you aren't or are, good luck!/aberdeen plato-rabelais peter jack."

This summary does not do justice to the sonnet's technique. Cummings is at his wittiest when he praises Jack for "tactfully ... subtracting clichés un by un/till the god's truth stands artnaked." "Tact-

fully" suggests not only the critic's kindness but also his deft touch as he removes the clichés which hide the nude beauty the artist has created yet concealed. In "subtracting," he has not only removed the clichés, but also any superadded "tract" or propagandistic element. And "un by un" is a precise way of saying that Jack carefully removes the elements which dull or negate beauty. Besides using "metaphysical" wordplay to create richness of meaning, Cummings also employs dynamic spacing in line nine to suggest the tumble to the safety net that ends, along with the cry "fertig," the trapeze act of the "Flying Wallendas." He also breaks "time/lessness" to suggest the "chasm" between the world of time and the world of dream - the chasm Jack crosses with the élan and flamboyance of a great circus "flyer." Cummings also puns on "fertig," which means not only "finished" but also "ready" or "prepared." Cummings implies that Jack has done more than make an end to his earthly act; he has also made a transcendental beginning.

Just as he praises Peter Munro Jack for his dynamic blending of the active and contemplative lives in #7, Cummings praises Ford Madox Ford in #9 (CP 607) for being

a(vastly and particularly)live
that undeluded notselfpitying

lover of all things excellently rare;
obsolete almost that phenomenon
(too gay for malice and too wise for fear)
of shadowy virtue and of sunful sin

Cummings' technique again plays a major part in creating a vivid portrait of Ford's vitality. The poet communicates Ford's appearance of being larger-than-life not only by describing him as a "world" but also by breaking "placidity" (ll. 3-4) so as to strongly draw out the

sibilant. And he exactly catches the embarrassing distraction created by the pyjamastrang hanging from Ford's trouser fly by describing it as "lightyears" long. He also uses tnesis in line seven to get the most from "alive."

What Cummings likes about both Jack and Ford is the selfless gusto with which they lived. Both are men "of shadowy virtue and of sunful sin" who live fully in life, accepting and involving themselves in it. Neither is self-pitying or fearful; both make their own decisions. Consequently, they are both models of the transcendently alive, and they¹ are fully worthy of our love and remembrance.

Aristide Maillol, who died in 1944, is praised in #19 (CP 617). Cummings presents Maillol as a self-reliant artist, patient in creating beauty - "growing stones" that are "ours for the mere worshipping." Maillol has a chthonic, timeless quality: "you feel behind this man/earth's first sunrise." Yet because "he's young with mysteries," he is vitally alive and growing in the present, which is more meaningful to him than any of his past accomplishments. Like Jack and Ford, Maillol is also a type for the transcendently alive artist.

Maillol is a specific example of the kind of man Cummings defines in Xaipe #11 (CP 609). In this sonnet, Cummings portrays man as an infinitely complex being for whom conclusive self-knowledge is an impossibility. Cummings says that every man is a composite of "many

¹Ford's raw vitality must have been striking. William Carlos Williams also noted it in "Ford Madox Ford in Heaven." He also described Ford's power to create his own world.

selves," capable of good and evil, but able to escape from none. Moreover, because man is deep in both the worlds of time and transcendence, each "simplest wish" or "hope" is a "tumult" of conflicting desires. And because man is mortal, yet capable of timelessness,

his briefest breathing lives some planet's year,
his longest life's a heartbeat of some sun;
his least unmotion roams the youngest star.

Recognizing that a man is not a single self but rather many selves, Cummings takes issue with English grammar, which implies through the symbol "I" that a man is a unitary psyche, asking rhetorically how a "fool that calls himself I" should "presume/to comprehend" his "not numerable" selves. "I" as either personal pronoun or Roman numeral is a mis-description. Paradoxically, the initial act of self-knowledge is to recognize one's ultimate inability to know his selves, to recognize his illimitable power to grow.

#28 (CP 626), another portrait, describes an aged woman who, like Maillol, has continued to grow by accepting her destiny. This "great lady," gazing at a vivid sunset, informs the poet that "noone can grow (gracefully or otherwise)old" because growing and being old are mutually exclusive. To be old means having given up one's active involvement with being and becoming; it means passively waiting to die because life has become either unbearably painful or dull. Growing, on the other hand, means being continually open to and involved with life, and continually striving to achieve one's destiny. The lady herself, in spite of being "autumnal," is growing. Like all things in the world of time, she ages. But still she grows; she is still involved in the processes of living, even in the face of imminent death (night and winter are near

for her). She is like the mountains outside her window; though immeasurably aged, "each grows" by "serenely welcoming/his only and illimitably his/destiny." As day turns to night, the speaker sees that this lady is a transcendently alive, "unimaginably young" soul who is still discovering her "not numerable" selves.

One of Cummings' most beautiful sonnets, Xaipe #63 (CP 661), pays homage to a group of transcendently alive men and women: Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims.

honour corruption villainy holiness
riding in fragrance of sunlight(side by side
all in a singing wonder of blossoming yes
riding)to him who died that death should be dead

humblest and proudest eagerly wandering
(equally all alive in miraculous day)
merrily moving through sweet forgiveness of spring
(over the under the gift of the earth of the sky

knight and ploughman pardoner wife and nun
merchant frere clerk somnour miller and reve
and geoffrey and all)come up from the never of when
come into the now of forever come riding alive

down while crylessly drifting through vast most
nothing's own nothing children go of dust

These are supremely alive in the "now" of timelessness because they gave themselves, rode to pay homage, "to him who died that death should be dead." Mostpeople, to the contrary, live aimlessly, drifting through their lives without purpose and without awareness of the world except as it relates to them. And they "go of dust" - they are as ephemeral and shortlived as dust motes in a sunbeam - because they have lived selfishly, closed themselves from the fragrance of sunlight, and refused to say "yes" to the reality outside themselves.

Just as these sonnets define by example the proper way to live in

the temporal world, so the satires define how mostpeople live wrongly. In #22 (CP 620), a well-known anthology piece, Cummings satirizes the world of modern industrial capitalism, saying that "we'll believe in that incredible/unanimal mankind" only when nature itself, patterning itself after man's society, has become unnatural.

when serpents bargain for the right to squirm
and the sun strikes to gain a living wage-
when thorns regard their roses with alarm
and rainbows are insured against old age

when every thrush may sing no new moon in
if all screech-owls have not okayed his voice
-and any wave signs on the dotted line
or else an ocean is compelled to close

when the oak begs permission of the birch
to make an acorn-valleys accuse their
mountains of having altitude-and march
denounces april as a saboteur

then we'll believe in that incredible
unanimal mankind(and not until)

As I have noted a number of times before, Cummings believes that it is perverse to surrender one's freedom to become himself; man must not "bargain" for his rights nor ask permission of others to be or to do what is natural for him nor delegate his decisions to others. Each individual must recognize that others are also individuals; ideally, nature is, for Cummings, a continuum of individuals. Valleys and mountains are not disparate parts; they are elements of a larger entity and must, therefore, accept each other. Nature accepts its cyclic being; March must be willing to be replaced by April, for they are both parts of the general scheme and cannot exist without each other. It is one of the "mysteries" in Cummings' thought that while all elements of nature insist on their right to be themselves, they also accept that there

is a season for all things and that they find their wholeness in being a part of the cycle.

Modern man, in contrast, has refused to play his part. He has cut himself off from nature by surrendering his freedom, by viewing his fellow men as alien and dangerous competition ("saboteurs"), and by seeking permanence and security against change. Hence, mankind has become an "unanimal" and impossible to believe in.

In the other satirical sonnet of Xaipe, #38 (CP 636), Cummings returns to the theme of individual freedom. Here he attacks the tyranny of the "state" over the individual, and implies that the American dream of freedom has become a mere delusion.

To Cummings, the statue of a "hero" in a public park is an object stuck up the public "anus" as a reminder that whatever the state decrees is morally justified: "if the quote state unquote says/'kill' killing is an act of christian love." The public hero is, moreover, a fraud; he is "any jerk/who was afraid to dare to answer 'no'" when called to kill by his nation. Such statues are monuments not to Americans who bravely sacrificed for their freedom, but rather to the sacrifice of freedom itself. "In 1944 AD," freedom has become an illusion. The state is supreme; if it declares, through "generalissimo e," that nothing "can stand against the argument of mil/itary necessity," then nothing, not even "reason," is allowed to. In fact, reason, the traditional guide and safeguard against tyranny, has been perverted into an "echo" of the state's demand. That is, it has been employed to justify the state's claims on the individual. As a result of the surrender of conscience, Cummings tells America: "you pays your money and/you doesn't take your choice."

As usual, Cummings' point is that men have surrendered their freedom to choose their destinies to an abstract entity called the state. It does not matter that the state here is a democratic republic engaged in an effort to stamp out a viciously brutal, totalitarian evil; to Cummings, a surrender is a surrender. In fact, his attack is made more challenging by his choice of targets; he has deliberately chosen a popular war and a popular leader (Eisenhower) in order to accentuate his point. Nearly all Americans would agree that every German should have opposed Hitler; what Cummings says is that blindly supporting any leader or ideology or project, no matter how laudable, is as heinous an abnegation of one's individuality as giving in to the Nazis. To surrender one's freedom to say "no" is the ultimate sin.

Besides the satires and portraits, there are six sonnets in which the speaker reflects on natural scenes. In each of these, the speaker discovers some truth about life, death, or transcendence which is inherent in that scene.

Xalpe begins with a lovely sonnet (CP 599) in which the poet interprets a sunset-moonrise that he and his lady have just witnessed.

this(let's remember)day died again and
again;whose golden,crimson dooms conceive

an oceaning abyss of orange dream

larger than sky times earth:a flame beyond
soul immemorially forevering am-
and as collapsing that grey mind by wave
(doom disappeared,out of perhaps(who knows?))

eternity floated a blossoming

(while anyone might slowly count to soon)
rose-did you see her?darling,did you(kiss
me)quickly count to never?you were wrong

-then all the way from perfect nowhere came

(as easily as we forget something)
livingest the imaginable moon

As in #5 of 50 Poems and #42 of lxl, the speaker here has a double purpose for his remarks. The first is to make certain his lady has attended to the miraculous beauty of the scene; the second and more important is to make sure she has correctly understood her experience.

The meteorological phenomena they have witnessed are gorgeous but fairly simple: the colors of the clouds, illuminated by the setting sun, modulate from golden through crimson to grey, and as the clouds disappear in the night, the moon rises behind them, appearing first as a luminous blot, then climbing above the clouds to be seen clearly.

The speaker is afraid the lady has responded to the sight of the moon veiled by the clouds, to the "blossoming rose," rather than to a clear vision of "livingest the imaginable moon." He says she was wrong if she mistook the rose rather than the moon as an emblem of transcendence. The moon, coming "all the way from perfect nowhere" (from the world of dream), rather than the rose which blossoms from "eternity" (which is still implicitly a part of the universe of time), is the symbol of "livingest" - of true, transcendental being. The speaker, socratically instructs her in order to cleanse her perception and to clarify her vision of the true reality.

The imagery intensifies the lesson the speaker teaches. The rising moon has been conceived by the multiple "dooms" of the day, and rises from "an oceaning abyss of orange dream." The day here is very reminiscent of Milton's image of the divine Spirit brooding over and

impregnating the "vast abyss" (Paradise Lost I, 19-22). Here too a new world or Eden is created for two lovers. However, the new world given the speaker and his lady by the day's deaths is one which must be perceived clearly and without the mediation of metaphor. It is not a blossoming rose the lady sees but the moon. The speaker implies she must not interpret but rather see plainly; reality is more glorious and alive than any metaphorical expression. The poet wants her to apprehend what Stevens calls "primary noon" or the "X." One transcends by accepting the fact of phenomena openly, not by forcing the phenomenal into metaphor, particularly worn-out poetic metaphor.

Louis Rus notes that the poet's parenthetical "let's remember" is ambiguous and may be read either as an admonition to remember this particular day or as a reminder that this was a day that "died again and again" (p. 111). The second possibility fits nicely with the speaker's assertion of the necessity of seeing clearly, reminding the lady that it was an element of the phenomenal world that has brought them a new dispensation, a new birth.

#5 (CP 603) attempts to explain why the phenomenal world men live in has cycles of birth, growth, and death. The poem begins with the speaker and a friend, perhaps his ladylove, out under a brilliantly starry sky. Astonished by the multitude of stars, the speaker exclaims:

swim so now million many worlds in each
least less than particle of perfect dark-
how should a loudness called mankind unteach
whole infinite the who of life's life(hark!
what silence)?

In an instant the speaker intuitively perceives that the twinkling stars, which he calls worlds because they twinkle (i.e. appear cyclical), are

as vitally alive and immediate ("so now") as our own world. Consequently, he wonders how it can happen that mankind fails to recognize the vitality of the cosmos, and unteaches (teaches falsely) that these worlds are inconceivably remote and definable only by arbitrary measures of magnitude and location.

The speaker's companion, who is gradually revealed to be more transcendently perceptive than the speaker, objects to the idea that stars are worlds (he knows their twinkling is caused by atmospheric distortion); he is sure they are "flowers," transcendently alive entities opening eternally to absolute reality as earthly flowers open to the sun. Loath to surrender his original insight, the speaker asks if worlds, like flowers, do not also "open" and "close." The answer is that while they do, they do so differently; they open and close as if "they wanted us to understand/they'd never close(and open)if that fool/called everyone(or you or i)were wise." Inferring that worlds may become like the stellar flowers, the speaker asks: "you mean worlds may have better luck,some day?" The friend, whose eyes reflect the stars above, responds: "or worse!poor worlds;i mean they're possible/-but flowers ... only are quite what worlds merely might be."

By "opens" and "closes" Cummings suggests the various cycles which inform all things in the worlds of men. Consequently the poem implies that the phenomenal world opens and closes in order to give men, if they have eyes to see, the message that transcendence, the condition of timeless openness and selfless individuality, is available. Only by suffering opening and closing can men conceive "what worlds might be."

In #35 (CP 633), the speaker and his lady are again set against a sunset. The speaker asks his lover to stand with him against the world of time and mostpeople until they become "dreams," transcendent souls at home in the "forever" of timelessness. He senses the imminence of their transformation as the sunset they watch fails (as "light's lives lurch"), night falls, and the world of day, time, and mostpeople gradually becomes "a once world" filled with an "army of unbeing," the "ghosts" of men. Sensing that transcendence is possible for them in this moment, that for them "least all turns almost now;now almost swims/ into a hair's width:into less?into/not," the speaker exhorts his lover to accept wholly and selflessly the transition from time to timelessness, from "least all" to "forever." Only by self-surrender and wholehearted silence of self can they enter into and become one with "night's total exploding millionminded Who."

Another such moment of transition is treated in Xaipe #41 (CP 639). The speaker, again sensing that transcendence into the noumenon is immediately possible, invites his lady to surrender her connection with the world of time and mortality, and touching "an angel named imagination," move into the world of dream.

The world of this poem is in upheaval, torn by a tremendous storm. The moon "reels" overhead, while the earth is "bombed" by the storm-tossed ocean. The lightning flares are like sparks from hell; "never was death so alive:chaos so absolute." The speaker and his lady have become clinging "wraiths," "ghosts drowning in supreme thunder." Yet in spite of the tempest, "never have breathed such miracle murdered we." The speaker and his lady have been liberated by the miraculous storm

from their former lives; no future moment can free them any more. Their deaths mark the beginning of a new life, and they are ready for rebirth. To begin it, the lady must "put out" her "eyes" and touch the angel. That is, she must not only make an effort to imagine, or live with dream, but also she must surrender her "eyes" or "i's" to enter into transcendence; she must sacrifice her isolating egocentrism if she is to enter the world of dream.

In #65 (CP 663), Cummings responds to an "amazing day" with a paean to God, thanking him for "everything which is natural which is infinite which is yes." He is prompted to this, for him unusual, statement by a lovely spring day - a day when both he and the earth seem reborn.

The sixth of the sonnets which reflect on natural scenes is #31 (CP 629), an impressionistic description of a smoky, noisy nightclub which is filled with drunken sailors, B-girls, and shrieking fairies. In the midst of this Hogarthian bedlam, a carrot-y-blond youth whispers drunkenly, over and over, "It's Snowing Isn't That Perfectly Wonderful."

This sonnet, one of the few since the early volumes to deal with the demimonde, illustrates the violent contrast that exists between the worlds of man and nature, and suggests the dangerous fragility of the connection between the two. While the rest of the patrons of this microcosm wallow in a miasma of "jukethrob" and vomit, only the youth is capable of seeing out into the natural world and of recognizing its wonderfulness. Even his insight is that of a drunk, and we must wonder if anything will come of it, if he will find it the first step toward

transcendence or his last chance to find it before the shades of the prison house darken his life forever.

To distinguish between the sonnets which respond to natural scenes and those which treat what up to now have been considered transcendental themes becomes in Xaipe more of an exercise in categorization than in noting significant distinctions. All of the sonnets in this volume are, in effect, worldly sonnets because all deal with living properly. The satires treat those who do not; the responses to nature explore the relation of the poet and his lady to the worlds of man, nature, and dream. And the "philosophical" sonnets yet to be discussed theorize about how to live in order to transcend.

In #51 (CP 649), for example, Cummings praises the transfiguring power of "innocence." Innocence, the capacity to be selflessly open to external reality, will make the speechless "dark of heart" sing, teach those "who could not learn to look" to see, lift "a luminous whole" from all nothing, transform "despairing" to "gay," and turn "nowhere to here, never to beautiful." On the other hand, whatever is done without innocence shall fail and disappear; indeed, the "proud power of himself death immense/is not so as a little innocence."

In #61 (CP 659), the poet wonders how the "contented fools of fact," those without innocence who believe in the facts they have defined for themselves, would respond if the lady and he should reach timelessness. How, he asks, should they envision the "mystery of freedom" if the lovers "steer" themselves into "infinite tomorrow." The question is rhetorical, of course; the speaker knows that most people cannot comprehend the "sweet miracles" of dream because they live in a

self-created "colossal hoax of clocks and calendars." The gulf between the world of time and the world of timelessness is bridged only by those who see through the hoax, having been "touched by love's own secret." Those who are untouched can only "stare deafly," if they can detect the lovers at all.

The world of "infinite tomorrow" and the world of clocks and calendars exist simultaneously. Comparing his lover and himself to homing birds returning to their nest, the poet says that they are "souls under whom flow a million wheres" which can never equal their native world of "more than dream." Yet, arriving to sing, they are still immersed in time. They share a temporal existence with the fools of fact, but have made a spiritual transition that renders them incomprehensible to those whose vision is constrained by the falsifications and distortions of reason. The speaker and lady are at home now and here in "nowhere," the transcendental life that exists in and beyond the unworld man has created arbitrarily.

Cummings returns to the topic of death in Xaipe #69 (CP 667), reassuring his lady that death, though inevitably a part of the process of nature, is not to be feared, for it is, in the nature of worlds that open and close, followed by rebirth.

now all the fingers of this tree(darling)have
hands,and all the hands have people;and
more each particular person is(my love)
alive than every world can understand

and now you are and i am now and we're
a mystery which will never happen again,
a miracle which has never happened before-
and shining this our now must come to then

our then shall be some darkness during which
fingers are without hands;and i have no
you:and all trees are(any more than each
leafless)its silent in forevering snow

-but never fear(my own,my beautiful
my blossoming)for also then's until

That Cummings' vision was maturing is evident in this sonnet.

Norman Friedman makes much of it, saying that "the speaker has developed a spiritual power which, in reminding us of such poems as Donne's 'Death, Be Not Proud,' puts Cummings in the main stream of English visionary poetry" (The Art, p. 165). In earlier poems Cummings recognized that he was subject to time and decay, but found a kind of escape from the phenomenal world through transcendent, timeless moments. These seemingly infinite excursions into the noumenon rendered his life in the unworld insignificant. Now, however, he has come to terms with reality, with the fact of mortal demise. Even as the speaker and his lady enjoy "a mystery which will never happen again,a miracle which has never happened before," he realizes that their "shining ... now must come to then." He knows their spring of joy must pass, that winter and death must come. But he finds in the cycle of the seasons assurance that death is transitory, "until."

Having accepted the necessity of failure, Cummings closes Xaipe with a humble request for a new beginning. In #71 (CP 669), the poet is aware that he is "disappearing" into the night, that he is near his
¹
end. He asks the new moon, always his symbol of triumphant "deathless-

¹He means, of course, not only his mortal end but also the end of his volume. He prays for a refreshed poetic faculty as well as for transcendence.

ness," to teach him "the keen/illimitable secret of begin."

The sonnets of 95 Poems (1958), like those of Xaipe, indicate that Cummings' vision of the nature of being continued to intensify in the eight years which separate the two volumes. Although there are no radical changes of stance here, a number of the sonnets in 95 Poems and 73 Poems (posthumous, 1963) reflect not only Cummings' belief that life in the phenomenal is a vital element in self-realization but also that he had learned to live and practice his belief wholeheartedly.

In my discussion of the sonnets of Xaipe, I noted that Cummings' decreasing interest in the unworld was a function of his maturation. As he becomes more at home with his vision, he turns away from the empty, self-centered structures most people impose on the world, concentrating instead on the problems and processes of living transcendently in time. This movement is continued in 95 Poems; here there are no explicit satires and few references to those who live wrongly. This is the opposite of escapism, for Cummings is moving away from the unreal and toward the real, out of the world of illusion and into the realm of the true.

The sonnets of 95 Poems begin, with #3 (CP 675), by announcing Cummings' sense of freedom from illusion.

now air is air and thing is thing: no bliss

of heavenly earth beguiles our spirits, whose
miraculously disenchanted eyes

live the magnificent honesty of space.

Mountains are mountains now; skies now are skies-
and such a sharpening freedom lifts our blood
as if whole supreme this complete doubtless

universe we'd (and we alone had) made

-yes; or as if our souls, awakened from
summer's green trance, would not adventure soon
a deeper magic: that white sleep wherein
all human curiosity we'll spend
(gladly, as lovers must) immortal and

the courage to receive time's mightiest dream

As Friedman says, Cummings is here acknowledging "the reality of the world of appearance" (The Art, p. 180). He has abandoned the belief that the phenomenal world is but an emanation of the noumenon; he has accepted the "magnificent honesty of space" as real. He is no longer beguiled by the concept that this life is a spectral condition; he has been freed of the deceptive "bliss" of such a philosophy and is seeing¹ clearly for the first time. It is as if he has awakened from a delusive trance or dream.

For the speaker, "summer has gone and winter is on its way" (Friedman, The Art, p. 180). His "summer's green trance," his total yet naive involvement with a nature that seemed "heavenly," has been broken; in his maturity he recognizes his "sharpening freedom" from illusion, his miraculous disenchantment, and he desires to live for a while in this new condition. He "would not adventure soon ... that white sleep" of death and transcendence. He embraces the world of appearance excitedly, not out of fear of his unknown doom (he says that he and the lady will "spend" themselves gladly) but because it seems he has created this new

¹It is clear that Cummings wanted the reader to think of the "Bower of Bliss" episode in The Fairy Queene. "Bliss" in both poems is associated with enchantment and delusion, and to lose such bliss is healthy.

earth himself, and he wishes to enjoy his creation and his new freedom of understanding before he puts it aside for death - "time's mightiest dream."

Coming very early in his first volume of new verse in eight years, this sonnet seems a manifesto - the enunciation of a deeper comprehension of the nature of things. He has discovered that one must accept the reality of the world in which men live, and not merely treat it as a necessary evil which one must embrace to transcend. The difference in attitudes is profound; the poet no longer values the earthly because it is "heavenly." Now he accepts the earthly in and for itself, knowing finally that transcendence truly encompasses all, finally escaping the contemptus mundi which has for so long underlain his emotional response to life.

In #11 (CP 683), a beautiful English sonnet, Cummings assures his lady, in a sort of sermon, that time is really noble and generous and not to be feared. This poem marks the poet's mature accommodation with time, and records his calm understanding and acceptance of time as a necessary, inescapable, even beneficial condition of life.

in time's a noble mercy of proportion
with generosities beyond believing
(though flesh and blood accuse him of coercion
or mind and soul convict him of deceiving)

whose ways are neither reasoned nor unreasoned,
his wisdom cancels conflict and agreement
-saharas have their centuries; ten thousand
of which are smaller than a rose's moment

there's time for laughing and there's time for crying-
for hoping for despair for peace for longing
-a time for growing and a time for dying:
a night for silence and a day for singing

In "Puella Mea," time was "eater of all things lovely." Now in his maturity, Cummings recognizes time as more than an all-devouring maw. Where once there was only the philosophical solace of knowing that all things have their season, now there is release and transcendence in timelessness. Now time alone offers hope to the mortal; life in time is truly felt to be the avenue to transcendence. Time resolves all anti-nomies.

Time's a strange fellow;
more he gives than takes
(and he takes all)nor any marvel finds
quite disappearance but some keener makes
losing,gaining.

Time, in its continual unfolding, now gives the keener marvel of transcendence. It effects the transition from old to new, from appearance to reality ("disappearance"), from phenomenal to noumenal. Time brings death, for "he takes all," but death is a gift - the "more" that time

"gives than takes" - because it allows the poet and his lady to see
"more than all worlds begin to begin."

The occasion of this reflection on time and death is the moment of an evening when the stars, always Cummings' symbol of the transcendental world, first become visible. It is a moment of insight, a miraculous glimpse into the noumenon. Time stops, "all nearness pauses," and "all distance breathes a final dream of bells." Time and space blend inseparably into the now/here of transcendental union. The moment and the vision, subject to time, pass. But the insight renews the poet's spirit and reveals to him time's beneficence. For him, life has become "wealthier" because the day, in dying, has given us "the upfloating moon" - an even more immediate transcendental presence.

A number of the other sonnets in 95 Poems signal the poet's maturity of vision. For example, Norman Friedman considers #63 (CP 735) "one of the most beautiful poems" Cummings wrote (The Growth, p. 169). Here the speaker reflects on his own insignificance and on his potential for transcendence. As Friedman says, "if he is given perfect mercy, such a small person may live in a transcendental world bigger than any merely physical universe. This is a world without any intellectual meaning, incapable of being killed by abstraction; a world of giving rather than taking; a marvel to be felt but not thought, a lesson which can be learned but not taught. If he is given a mercy beyond that of sun after storm, spring after winter, such a small person will transcend, just as the April of April, the awake of awake, transcends" (The Growth, pp. 169-170).

This sonnet is more than Cummings' humble admission that he is

small and insignificant, dependent on "perfect mercy" for salvation. It is also a statement of preparedness. That is, Cummings not only says that he has reached the spiritual stage where he can, if given mercy, transcend. He is already "almost too small for death's because to find." With mercy, he implies, he will be able to escape death's finality completely, and "will climb;will blossom:will sing." Just as Christian dogma requires grace in addition to good works, so Cummings requires perfect mercy in addition to spiritual readiness. This sonnet marks a moment when the poet feels he is precisely "unbig" enough to transcend if elected. He has become "small," abandoning his egoistic will to power over things through reason (he says reason "kills") to become a "why" open to the miracle of being. Cummings has unburdened himself of the false riches of the ego and is ready to pass through the eye of the needle.

#84 (CP 756), which also reflects Cummings' assurance of vision, treats a subject infrequently found in Cummings' poetry: the sun. Even more unusual is what Friedman calls the poet's "almost religious ecstasy of mystical identification with the father of all life and all light" (The Art, p. 175).

how generous is that himself the sun

-arriving truly,faithfully who goes
(never a moment ceasing to begin
the mystery of day for someone's eyes)

with silver splendors past conceiving who

comforts his children,if he disappears;
till of more much than dark most nowhere no
particle is not a universe-

but if,with goldenly his fathering

(as that himself out of all silence strolls)
nearness awakened, any bird should sing:
and our night's thousand million miracles

a million thousand hundred nothings seem
-we are himself's own self; his very him

The sun never ceases to give, never ceases to "begin the mystery of day for someone's eyes." Even in the night his reflected "silver splendors" give comfort. His radiance permeates all; every "particle" of timelessness is made a "universe." For the poet, however, the sun's most miraculous effect is at dawn; should his golden "fathering nearness" inspire a bird's song, the "thousand million miracles" of the night are made to seem "nothings," and the poet and his lady are raised into transcendence, into unity with the sun, to become "himself's own self; his very him."

The sun is here a complete, transcendent individual - the archetype of all complete spirits. He is utterly self-contained, completely himself. Yet he is also totally faithful and totally generous - giving without return, sharing without demanding.

In earlier sonnets Cummings embraced the night and death because they seemed his avenues into the world of dream. Now, making the sun his archetype or symbol of transcendental living wholeness, Cummings clearly implies that he has found reality amidst what were before the illusions of day; his acceptance of life seems absolute.

One of the striking features of the sonnets of 95 Poems is the frequency and number of poems which praise the poet's lady. Nearly half the sonnets deal with her influence over the poet or with the significance of the love they share.

#7 (CP 679), for example, is highly organized praise of the effect the lady has on the poet and his conduct.

because you take life in your stride (instead
of scheming how to beat the noblest game
a man can proudly lose, or playing dead
and hoping death himself will do the same

because you aren't afraid to kiss the dirt
(and consequently dare to climb the sky)
because a mind no other mind should try
to fool has always failed to fool your heart

but most (without the smallest doubt) because
no best is quite so good you don't conceive
a better; and because no evil is
so worse than worst you fall in hate with love

-human one mortally immortal i
can turn immense all time's because to why

The gist of this sonnet is that the speaker's now able to conquer time - to "turn immense all time's because to why" and attain transcendence - because his lady, simply by being herself, provides him with a pattern for being. The poet attains transcendence by a process analogous to the Christian "imitation of Christ."

The lady does not try to escape death by running away or by maintaining a low profile ("playing dead"); she takes it "in stride." And she also takes the totality of life's experiences; she isn't "afraid to kiss the dirt." Her flexibility and openness to life allow her to "dare to climb the sky." She relies on her heart to provide her truth, although she has a mind that "no other mind should try/to fool." Her most inspiring attribute is her unfailing idealism; she is never fool enough to believe that what exists is all that can be, yet she always loves and submits to what is.

The ultimate effect on the speaker of the lady's being is to allow him "to turn immense all time's because to why." He has been spiritually transformed by her power so that death has become for him a beginning rather than an ending. "Why" is open; "because" is closed and final. "Why" is a beginning; "because" is a conclusion. "Immense all time's because" concludes the lives of mere mortals, but for the poet, who is now "mortally immortal," death marks a beginning, a new openness to the world of dream.

This poem is particularly notable for the organic fusion of structure and rhetorical procedure. The gross structure of the sonnet is itself logical; a fairly strict English form, the combination of three quatrains and a concluding couplet lends itself to the expression of cause-and-effect relationships. Moreover, a logical relationship is expressed. The three quatrains present statements explicitly labelled causes ("because" is the key term in each quatrain), and the couplet describes the effect of those causes. Paradoxically, the effect of the lady is to liberate the poet from the very process which makes possible his liberation. They are both subject to time and process, but he is freed from that process by her effect on him. I believe Cummings was trying to capture in this sonnet the paradoxicality of life in the phenomenal: we live, and by living transcend; we become immortal "mortally."

In #45 (CP 717), Cummings proclaims his love again. While it remains winter in the world, the poet enjoys spiritual spring because of his lady's transforming effect; "sunlight and singing" welcome her

coming to him. And

although winter may be everywhere
with such a silence and such a darkness
noone can quite begin to guess

(except my life)the true time of year.

Cummings' acceptance of the realness of life in the temporal seems to be belied by attitudes implicit in several of his love poems. In #71 (CP 743), for example, the poet and his lady stand on a storm-torn shore watching the surf crash into spindrift. Aware of the suggestiveness of the scene - it is the "ending earth" - the poet is reminded of the helplessness of mostpeople amidst the flux of time and nature. He reminds his lover of the condition of the mass of men:

suppose we could not love,dear;imagine

ourselves like living neither nor dead these
(or many thousand hearts which don't and dream
or many million minds which sleep and move)
blind sands,at pitiless the mercy of

time time time time time

His insight only heightens his appreciation of their own transcendence. "How fortunate" he and his lady are "to have wandered down/from fragrant mountains of eternal now/to frolic" in the temporal world before returning to their "home" in timelessness.

This sonnet hints at a wavering of the poet's mature vision, for while he sees "such mysteries as birth and death" as necessary, inseparable parts of being in the phenomenal world, he asserts that they, like all aspects of the phenomenal, are inconsequential to him whose home is timelessness. He seems to have reverted to an earlier position, denying the reality of the world of appearance. However, we must

consider the circumstances; he is praising his lady and reassuring her fears. Since she has not his firm philosophy, he denies the significance of the phenomenal to make the transcendental more real to her.

#88 (CP 761) also praises the transfiguring power of the poet's lady. Her love, utter and instinctive, "comprehends" (i.e. both understands and encompasses) more of transcendence than analytical reason "shall ever provingly disprove."

The poet lives in a world which "nothing believable inhabits." Here parts are taken for wholes: "shadows are substances and wings are birds." But the lady's "fearless and complete love" makes "all safely small/big wicked worlds of world disappear." And she turns the poet's words "to a silence who's the voice of voice." She not only inspires his transcendent vision but also directs him to write of a silence who is the voice of voice. And, paradoxically, she renders him silent by teaching him that words, abstractions, are but pale shadows of the truth.

As he did in #71, Cummings seems to have retreated from reality; certainly the half-world he describes here is unsatisfactory to him. I think he takes this position in order to praise his lady's redemptive power; that is, he creates a condition of spiritual malaise which her love heals.

Cummings' retreats from the realness of the world are only temporary, dramatic gestures. In the sonnet immediately following, #73 (CP 745), the poet and his lady no longer frolic in the mysteries of birth and death; now they are engaged enough in those mysteries to suffer serious wounds. Whereas #71 implied that life in the unworld

was essentially insignificant to those who have achieved transcendence, this sonnet treats life as an integral part of being.

In order for him and his lady to "reverently share the blessed eachness of all beautiful selves" in transcendence, the poet says they must climb "from some loud unworld's most rightful wrong" and be "shrived of that nonexistence millions call life." They must die to be healed. Still, however wrong life is, it is also "most rightful" to live in it in order to attain "blessed eachness."

In #89 (CP 762), Cummings instructs his lady in how one must live in time. The poet, strolling with her just as "what were motionless move," is suddenly inspired by the sight of a newly unfurled leaf. His joyous "amazement" reaffirms his assurance that feeling is first, that there "exists no miracle mightier than this: to feel" the miraculous rebirth of nature. He knows that whole worlds may do and die, but the promise of rebirth remains uncompromised.

The lady's faith in transcendence is not as firm, apparently, for the poet tries to reassure her. Plucking a leaf, he offers it as an emblem and promise of her own spiritual renewal. The lady is imaged as a tightrope artiste and the leaf as a "parasol" to help her maintain a spiritual balance.

To live properly in the phenomenal is to "walk in the air" "almost breathing." The poet tells her to "look up," to think continually on transcendence, and to dance with him high "above anybody and fate and even Our/whisper it Selves." They, who "were less than dead," have "become more than alive" by the miracle of spring. They must not look down (i.e. be concerned about death) or to the past or future; they must concentrate on nothing "except love."

From his childhood Cummings was in love with the circus, and his works are full of circus imagery. In the play Him, the protagonist, a failed artist, compares himself to a tightrope clown who tries to sit "on three chairs in Heaven," to "kick them out from under" himself, and to "stand on air."¹ That is, through his art the protagonist tries to break free of his earthly bonds and transcend. But he cannot because he is a man and therefore a "failure"; he must fall. In this sonnet, love rather than art allows the poet and lady to dance high above the mundane. But here too failure is implicit in the image. Like the protagonist of Him, they are bound to fail; they too must come down to suffer death. I believe the poet knows this, but he sees that the lady needs a proof to allay her fear. The leaf is that proof. It allows her to maintain her poise in the face of the failure that is the lot of all daring souls.

The nature and power of love is the subject of two of the late sonnets in 95 Poems. Now more than ever, love is seen as the force which fuses all creation into a timeless copresence.

In #91 (CP 765), Cummings defines love and its effects by defining "unlove," the condition of mostpeople.

unlove's the heavenless hell and homeless home
of knowledgeable shadows(quick to seize
each nothing which all soulless wraiths proclaim
substance;all heartless spectres,happiness)

Mostpeople are knowledgeable shadows, expert in analytic ratiocination,

¹E. E. Cummings, Three Plays and a Ballet, ed. George J. Firmage (New York: October House, 1967), p. 11.

because they have accepted the phenomenal world of matter as the final world of "substance." They are quick to seize each "nothing" of the phenomenal because, compared to themselves, it is solidly real and something they can grasp. Most people are "shadows," "spectres," and "wraiths" - insubstantial creatures needing to fasten themselves to something real, yet unable to distinguish between mere matter and true substance because they lack the ability to love.

Unlike most people, who live in shadowland, "lovers alone wear sunlight"; lovers alone are at home in the true reality and capable of existing in themselves. They alone accept themselves and the external without demanding that one conform or subordinate itself to the other. They are the "song" that "the whole truth/not hid by matter; not by mind revealed" sings.

Most people look for happiness in other places and other times. They believe that they can be happy in the future or elsewhere, but they are never happy now. Lovers, however, know that happiness, transcendence, can exist only in the present; "here (only here) is freedom: always here/no then of winter equals now of spring." Lovers embrace and accept the present, and in doing so transform phenomenal winter to transcendent spring. Love redeems them from time; their "april's day transcends november's year." By loving they metamorphose time into timelessness, into "eternity."

Cummings concludes his small essay on the effect of love by offering an example of love's power from his own life: "eternity being so sans until/twice i have lived forever in a smile." Love brings timeless moments of transcendence while we live in the phenomenal world. But

love does not liberate the lovers from "november's year" utterly; the poet has lived forever but he has also returned to the world of time. Only death is the final liberation.

#94 (CP 768), the final sonnet of the volume, is a beautiful affirmation of love's transcendent power, and reflects Cummings' mature accommodation to life and death.

being to timelessness as it's to time
love did no more begin than love will end;
where nothing is to breathe to stroll to swim
love is the air the ocean and the land

(do lovers suffer?all divinities
proudly descending put on deathful flesh:
are lovers glad?only their smallest joy's
a universe emerging from a wish)

love is the voice under all silences,
the hope which has no opposite in fear;
the strength so strong mere force is feebleness:
the truth more first than sun more last than star

-do lovers love?why then to heaven with hell.
Whatever sages say and fools,all's well

Love is the spiritual continuum underlying and comprehending all elements of being: "love is the air the ocean and the land." Those who love, who are open to life totally and completely, who do not interpose egoistic demands but sure of themselves accept and give wholly, live in transcendent timelessness, even though like all "proud divinities" they put on "deathful flesh" and suffer the pangs of life in the restricted world of time and space. They do live and they do transcend. "Whatever sages say and fools," Cummings is finally sure that for those who love, "all's well."

95 Poems is the first volume of Cummings' poetry, except the early Tulips and Chimneys, which is not-clearly organized by the arrangement

of the sonnets. In the volumes since No Thanks, the sonnets have provided a regular, sometimes mathematically precise, framework of ideas which inform the thematic movement of the volume. Moreover, as the poet's vision has matured, these structures have become looser and less rigid. In 95 Poems only the suggestion of the pattern remains because the poet himself has outgrown the process which informed his earlier work. That is, just as Cummings has resolved the dichotomy between the real and the phenomenal, so his sonnets have ceased to move dramatically from "dirty" to "clean" themes; now all the sonnets are essentially "clean," and the placement of the majority of them (12 of 19) in the latter half of the volume, which they dominate, reflects the poet's transformation.

The shadow of a pattern remains. The early sonnets in 95 Poems are essentially worldly poems which treat life in the world at hand. The later sonnets, which are mainly love sonnets which explore transcendence, are not unworldly but are less immediately concerned with the worldly, stressing the timelessness of the lovers rather than their worldly life together.

The process of transition from the phenomenal to the noumenal is the subject of #48 and #49, which must be taken together not only because they are contiguous but also because they treat a single experience of transcendental insight.

In #48 (CP 720), Cummings describes the metamorphoses he experiences in the course of a day and night spent wandering the streets of a town. In the daytime, when "houses turning into themselves grow/silent upon new perfectly blue," the poet is a "someone," a public

person engaged in worldly pursuits, although his identity and goals are unknown even to himself. As evening falls, as "streets taking moment off by moment day/thankfully become each other," he changes into an "any ... one." He is anonymous in a crowd which hurries "crylaughingly" homeward. But in the night, when the streets are empty and the houses dark, the "almost vanished" poet becomes a "no-one"; he ceases to be an identity-less separate entity and becomes a completely alive transcendent "am."

The poet is happy with this conclusion, for he is one "for whom the departure of everything real is the arrival/of everything true." The vanishing of the phenomenal, workaday world is simultaneously the coming of the spiritual and transcendent.

On one level this sonnet is autobiographical. Cummings' practice was to paint, stroll, and conduct his business during the day, and to write his poetry at night.¹ However, the significance of the poem lies in the traditional symbols of the journey and the night, along with the terms "someone," "anyone," and "noone." If the night symbolizes death, then the poem suggests that the poet becomes an "am," attains identity and being, only in and through death. In life he has been a someone, perhaps a public figure, and an anyone - a man subject to the common lot of men; now he is released from his oneness into unity with all. Paradoxically, his fall from the "real" is his ascendance into the "true"

¹This habit may explain Cummings' penchant for evening and night scenes in the sonnets.

or transcendent. His death is his birth; he dies as a "one" to live as an "am."

#49 (CP 721) is a continuation of the events described in the preceding poem. In that sonnet, the poet became, in the night and at the blossoming of a "first star," a "noone" or "am." In the present sonnet, that "noone and a star stand, am to am." The poet has instantly spanned "millionary wherewhens" - what petty minds conceive of as vast distances of space and time - to "stand/soul to soul:freedom to freedom" with the star. "United by perfect nothing," they are not separated by phenomenal "thing" but rather joined in the oneness of the noumenal. This marriage of "human one;and one celestial" is consummated when "her utmost secrecies and his/(dreaming flame by flaming dream)/merge." And as a marriage makes two bodies one flesh, so this marriage creates a new being: "a (who is neither each/both and)Self" capable of adventuring "deathlessness." The poet, who became a "noone" in #48, is now a "Self," a timeless citizen of transcendence, able because of his marriage to abide in deathless union with all.

The sonnets of 73 Poems affirm that Cummings had attained a clearly defined lebensphilosophie at the time of his death. In these sonnets, Cummings has wholly accepted the necessity of life in time, accepted the reality of that life and its attendant phenomena, and submitted himself to its processes. And he remains absolutely certain of his transcendental rebirth.

There is, however, a strong undercurrent of impatience reflected in these sonnets - an impatience born of frustration with a recalcitrant

unworld and of great expectations too long deferred. It is Cummings' frustration with the world which explains the poet's renewed satirical tone. It is his frustration which explains the spiritual paralysis he admits in the latter part of the volume.

The first of the sonnets in 73 Poems, #18 (CP 790), is a satire on those who refuse to accept life as it is and who deny their individual existential responsibility to shape their own doom. "Mrs somethingwiz/nay somethingelsestein" is inconceivably "future." She looks to the future for a better life, for solutions to the vicissitudes of the present. She never doubts that "all goodness truth and beauty" are to be had tomorrow. For the poet, however, the future is "form/less form"; it has name but no substance. For Cummings, to deny the living present is to be not merely in league with death (suffering death-in-¹life) but also to be one of death's active minions. It is not inappropriate that this woman be Jewish by both marriage and birth (note the pun on nay - née, French for "born"), for the Jews have long been future-oriented; they await the coming of the Messiah and their certain² restoration to the Promised Land.

¹That death is here equated with evil may be detected in the slight allusiveness of the verb "swarm" in line six; one recalls Milton's description of Satan's hordes, which swarmed "As Bees/In spring time."

²I believe Mrs. Somethingwitz's Jewishness is intended to add tonal depth; she is certainly not to be taken as an anti-Semitic symbol of the Jews.

After the parenthetical introduction of the idea that Mrs. Somethingwitz is an "idealist" of sorts, a seeming disjunction of ideas occurs. In lines 10-12, the speaker comments on politicians who "like the sight of vote," and notes in an ironic upper-crust accent that "everyone knows" that politics "is/wut ektyouelly metus" (what actually matters). The connection between Mrs. Somethingwitz and the politicians is not farfetched, however, and it certainly gives us an insight into the consistency of Cummings' poetic logic. Just as a Mrs. Somethingwitz looks to the future and abandons the present, so voters, looking for reform and progress, abdicate their responsibility for living in the present by transferring to politicians the power to govern over them, to make the future better for them. Politicians are by nature futurists; they must condemn the present and promise progress in order to get elected. They like the sight of vote because voting means they will have an existence. Cummings despises those who encourage the abdication of individual responsibility, and reviles those who will not live wholeheartedly in the present.

The last two lines of the poem confirm the thematic and symbolic unity of the poem. The spiritually damaged Mrs. Somethingwitz limps into the future "unbeside" the politician. But even as they leave, their backs to the present, the woman's whining complaints drift back to us, reminding us that we must embrace the exigencies of the present if we are truly to live; we cannot live as she does in a world of "if only."

Cummings' growing impatience also explains the irritable tone of #32 (CP 804), which reaffirms Cummings' dislike for the dispassionate

life. By damning "talking," which he implies is a sort of verbal onanism, he praises "singing" - "the language of transcendence" (Stetler, p. 157).

After setting forth his premise that singing and talking are mutually exclusive, and that talking is essentially non-communicative, Cummings elaborates on how talking is self-centered, sterile, and involute. In lines 3-4 he says that it does not matter whether one is "master or disciple sheep or wolf," or is seeking to discover himself, for it is all a matter of talking to no purpose; no one is there to hear except oneself. Lines 5-6 reflect on the 20th-Century treatment of the ego as "deity" (as in the case of certain varieties of existential philosophers) or "devil" (as in the case of the Freudians). One may even adore one's self, as it is projected or embodied in a lover, with epithets of courtly love, calling it "cruel fair" or "blessed evil."

Cummings' wisdom is apparent when he declares that the object of veneration "is you(né i)nobody else." The potential for meaning of the parenthetical phrase is quite large, and it begins with the overt meaning that the ego, the "i," is at the original center - () - of all of us. It may also visually suggest the placement of the "eye" in the head. Certainly the phrase asserts on the speaker's part a sense of common humanity, a feeling that "you" and "i" are born into the same condition. Cummings recognizes that we all face the possibility of being unable to sing. And also, ironically, if we hear in the French "né" an aural pun on "nay," the line indicates that communication has failed - that the talker continues to be imprisoned by the ego, that the gap between

people has not been transcended, that "you" and "i" are not one.

Another path for the "i-solate" is to affirm his being through the will to power, through politics. But while he may "drive dumb mankind dizzy with haranguing" - note the apt choice of words: "haranguing" suggests a total failure of communication - he only deafens himself.

Having by line eleven explored some of the increasingly public roles that the human ego plays when the heart is unable to "walk barefoot into reality," the speaker closes the third quatrain with a re-statement of the thesis: "all is merely talk which isn't singing/and all talking's to oneself alone." The rounding off of the main theme is purposeful: the speaker wants to indicate the separation of "silence," which is the "very song of ... singing," from the mundane world of mere sound. Cummings believes that a silent acceptance of life, an ego-less self-effacement before reality, is the cause of the joyfulness that generates "singing." In order to fully arrive at unity with nature - and thereby attain transcendence, that unity exhibited by mountains and lovers - one must be silent; the "i" must close.

The point of the sonnet is perfectly clear: dispassionate "talking" fails to break through the barrier of egoism that exists between people, and between the individual and nature. Only singing can effect real communication and communion. Singing, language in harmony, is ultimately choral - a shared act of outward-oriented selflessness. Cummings is here very plainly reasserting that a joyous and selfless acceptance of life-as-it-is, of phenomenal nature, is the only way one may attain the world of dream.

Cummings' impatience is far more evident, and significant, in three sonnets which occur near the end of the volume. In two of these, we discover a profound sense of spiritual paralysis and frustration; in the other we find a sense of defeat at the hands of mostpeople.

#67 (CP 839) is a poignant prayer to death to release the frustrated speaker from his state of spiritual barrenness. He is ready for his death, which he believes will enable him to attain transcendence. He wants to exist in that "silence" which is the essence of "singing." But instead of death, "enters no ... silence:but unsinging"; merely the absence of joy comes into his life. In this limbo or "spectral ... hush" there is no harmony, only the "crash" of inanimate matter. To the speaker, new life or "april" is far away. In this state of unsinging, the poet says he is a "perpetually roaming whylessness." He has no motion with purpose; he is a "hollow" man: "Shape without form, shade without colour/Paralyzed force, gesture without motion" (T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men," ll. 11-12). In an agony of frustration, the poet cries out: "autumn has gone:will winter never come?" In the "Ode to the West Wind," Shelley was ecstatic in his knowledge that winter's pangs would be healed by inevitable spring. Cummings' faith in rebirth is no less, but he needs the release of winter, of death, now. But it will not come to free him.

The situation established in the octave prepares the reader for the actual prayer, which comprises the sestet.

o come,terrible anonymity;enfold
phantom me with the murdering minus of cold
-open this ghost with millionaire knives of wind-
scatter his nothing all over what angry skies and

gently
(very whiteness: absolute peace,
never imaginable mystery)
descend

Death brings the negation of individual identity, an "anonymity" that is terrible in its awesome power. The speaker prays for this loss of self, desiring in very violent imagery complete dissolution. He wants his present self, which he conceives of as a "phantom" or "ghost" because of its spiritual emptiness, scattered completely. And he wants the snow, a symbol of the calm motionlessness of death, to descend and bury his old existence. It must descend for his transcendence to occur.

In #49, one of the lessons the poet heard in the bird's song - the song of nature - was the "truth of patience." The present poem marks the failure of the poet's patience; it records an impatience understandable in light of his lifelong desire for transcendence. His faith has not wavered; he remains committed to submission to time and death, to "winter." But his ability to wait for the fullness of time has not withstood the test of life.

Like #67, #71 (CP 843) also finds the speaker "stranded on the dry and arid shore" of an unchanging, frustrating earthly existence (Stetler, p. 167). He wants the tide of life and death to turn, a new cycle of existence to begin. He says he will continue to wait, to keep his "tryst," for the sake of love, "until that tide shall turn." Then, because in waiting he has overridden his egocentric impatience, his spirit - the "myself's own self who's)child" will "dance" in transcendent ecstasy. The speaker then says of his liberated self: "and when he's plucked such mysteries as men/do not conceive-let ocean grow again."

That is, when his spirit has embraced transcendence to the full (if it ever can - Cummings may intend irony here), he will let the cycle begin again.

The speaker wonders "how many centuries" he will have to "restroll and stroll" this "never deepening beach." He is impatient for release from his stasis, yet his faith that release will come never wavers; he knows that only "love," which requires self-effacement and submission to life, "understands" how long he will be "locked in foreverish time's"¹ embrace.

Implicit in this sonnet is the idea that the speaker, by means of love, spans the two realms of existence - that he lives on the shore where meet earth and ocean, phenomenal and transcendental, temporal and timeless. He is ever aware of their copresence and coexistence, and his life is everlastingly moving from one to the other. The present poem reflects the speaker's frustration at being "locked" in time; he wants to move into his next phase. This is surely a reflection of Cummings' readiness in his old age to face the grand adventure.

#70 of 73 Poems (CP 842) describes the nature of an artist's being and his relations with the mass of humanity. While the speaker sympathizes with the artist whose plight is to suffer in pursuit of his art,

¹The arrangement of lines 1-5 helps the reader comprehend this simultaneous frustration and faith; the syntax of lines 1-4 suggests the question "how long?" while the subject-verb structure in line five ("love alone understands") transforms the preceding syntactic structure into an extended objective clause.

he also praises him, and damns "such a monster's fellowmen" for their failure to respond to that art.

An artist is any person "who dies to be at any moment born," who gives up his own ego-centered existence through his art to attain transcendence. Painters are those "for whom crumbs of colour can create/precision more than angels fear to learn/and even fiends." Using crumbs of color, or fragments of this world's palette, the artist sacrifices himself to create sublime "precision," an analogue of the ideal in the phenomenal. If he is a musician, the artist "paints with sound" to "release the fragrance of a freedom which no mind/contrives (but certainly each spirit is)." And if he is a writer, he uses his metaphors to open "the simple agony of time" to find timelessness. Whatever his medium, one artist is similar to all: he is trying to attain transcendence through his art. And as Stetler points out, despair is "illimitable" for the artist who fails to "make a dream speak"; he hurts more because he has sacrificed part of himself, because he "dies to be ... born" (Stetler, p. 167). And because his agony, when it occurs, is awesome, we have for him the pity reserved for tragic heroes.

However, while Cummings is aware of the artist's illimitable plight, he is not merely pleading for understanding and pity. Indeed, throughout his life, Cummings believed that artists such as are described in the present sonnet are truly alive, while most people live robot-like mechanical existences. To read this poem merely as a plea for understanding is to disregard the disdain the poet has for the artist's so-called "fellowmen." The artist's plight is a desirable one in spite of the pain. It is a situation which results from having the capacity for

transcendence. To "pity" those who have this capacity is foolish. Why pity those who are potentially rich beyond life's dreams? The artist has a greater potential for transcendence than "angels" or "fiends"; common pity is the last thing such an illimitable person requires from the mob.

Cummings' hatred of "manunkind" may be seen in the final couplet. The poet believes that the mob, hating what it does not comprehend, enjoys seeing the artist fail. They like to see his transcendence (his "now") pass away ("go then"); they enjoy his pain because they resent his difference and his greatness.

This poem certainly reflects the poet's faith in the power and capacity of the artist to achieve that "freedom which no mind/contrives (but certainly each spirit is)." And the terms by which the passage to transcendence is described indicate the poet's continuing acceptance of death and the loss of self as the gateway to dream. #67 described an instance of the poet's failure to open "the simple agony of time." Now, in this sonnet, his plight - his failure to attain transcendence - is seen philosophically as a risk attendant on being an artist. One must want to die, to efface one's individual identity, if one is to be re-born. And, Cummings implies here, the artist must be prepared to bear the pangs of stillbirth. It is an "illimitable," admirable plight.

The poet's frustration is all the more notable in the context of the sonnets of love and transcendence that dominate the middle of the volume. Comprising the core of his final volume, these sonnets clearly indicate the firmness and centrality of Cummings' vision. Like the love sonnets of 95 Poems, these emphasize the natural transcendence of the

poet's lady, her power to transform the life of the poet, and his transcendental assurance. They also define again the major aspects of Cummings' stance toward the nature of things.

#35 (CP 807) epitomizes Cummings' mature conception of the relation between the phenomenal and noumenal worlds. This sonnet is both a serious comment on approaches to transcendence and a sexual joke, and it is thematically unified.

It has been pointed out that this sonnet "describes two approaches to transcendence, one faulty and one sound" (Stetler, p. 157). The faulty method is to attempt to use reason - that "dismal misconception," that "teachable imposture" - to define or measure man's limitations. All reason can measure is outer appearance, what is learned by the "eye." Cummings implies that intelligence, as we measure it in our culture, is simply the ability to see and manipulate the phenomenal world; we define intelligence by measuring "eye cue." Like the "eye," the reason cannot see into the heart of things.

A better method of attaining to the noumenal is the attribute, perhaps birthright, of "every woman who's a woman": intuition. A woman "knows" without entering into the circular tricks or impostures of "thinking." And because she loves in spite of the "ultramachinations of/some loveless infraworld," she can play the "hostess" (she is at home in the transcendental world) to her guest; she can help him achieve his transcendence, his "morethanme."

The larger meaning of the poem exists in abstractions. But Cummings always refines his abstractions from ore mined in the physical world. In this case, the power of the lady to enable the speaker to

attain his larger being is abstracted from her power to bring the speaker to sexual ecstasy. That is, the poet is saying that it is through woman, in her physiological capacity, that he achieves sexual joy. In this context, the "morethanme" is clearly the speaker's enlarged sexual organ. The poet is here a perceptive psychologist, for he implies in the phrase "morethanme" that overbearing quality of the male in a state of rut. That is, the speaker's reason is overcome by his passion, and his passion leads, with the lady's cooperation, to joy. On the earthly plane, the speaker's lady is "hostess" to his physical body; on the spiritual, her love enables him to transcend his mundane, "thinking" self, to become more than himself, to enter into oneness with things. And in doing so, the poet implies that "thinking" - a solitary, sterile act - is a sort of self-abuse, a false way to pleasure.¹ We have again the idea that sexual joy is the physical type of and path to transcendence, and that things above are as things below.

This poem is about how the physical and spiritual worlds interpenetrate and coexist, and how reason can only fail to move from the phenomenal to the noumenal. The circularity of the journey that reason always makes, the fact that it must always return to its starting place, may be a veiled allusion to Einstein's theory, known to Cummings, that space is curved, and that all journeys in this universe ultimately end

¹D. H. Lawrence saw this when he observed that the malady of the 20th century was modern man's inability to subordinate reason to "blood-consciousness." "Thinking" in the sonnet under discussion is analogous to Lawrence's idea of sex-in-the-head.

where they begin. Einstein's achievement, hailed as a supreme act of scientific genius, would seem to Cummings a perfect proof, as well as example, of the failure of reason to help man attain transcendence, a proof of the failure of all but love. Einstein locked the door on those who think mere motion is progress. Cummings' concept of reality is clear in this poem: he affirms that one transcends by embracing the outer world; he says that one cannot get to heaven by running away from earth.

The poet's lady's transforming effect is specifically treated in #38 (CP 810). This sonnet is a good illustration of the poet's long-held conception of his lady's effect on him, and her role in determining his relations with the phenomenal and transcendental worlds. The meaning of the sonnet is obvious, but the complex syntax of the octave, combined with Cummings' conceptual vocabulary, makes a full appreciation difficult to arrive at.

In lines 1-4, the poet tells his lady that the miraculous rebirth of the earth out of the night is less exciting to him, less profoundly transfiguring, than the "mystery" her "smile/sings." He assumes that the lady, and the reader, will know how ecstatic his joy is at the beauty of nature, and this knowledge will make her more appreciative of her power. He may also imply here, by his use of the word "guess" to mean the world at dawn, that even a new insight into nature is less stirring than a smile from his lady ("guess" used as a noun suggests a thing at which we marvel and ask, "What is it?").

The "if ... then" structure of the first quatrain is repeated in the second. Here the poet says that if he should hear ecstatic voices

singing in the dawn, he would feel less transcendently liberated than when he kisses his lady.

The denial of nature, or at least the relegation of nature to the second place, might well seem a sort of apostasy to the knowledgeable reader of Cummings' work. The sestet makes perfectly clear the shift that has occurred: the poet has attained transcendence, found "selves" hitherto unimaginable by the paradox of "losing," through the lady, what seemed himself. She replaces nature as the physical object in which the poet dissolves his separating, isolating ego.

Still, nature has not been denied totally. The lady is a part of the real world, and the real world as it is epitomized in her is still the source of the poet's transcendental insight. The dichotomy between the lady and nature - here surely signifying trees, birds, mountains, and so forth - is only superficial; in fact, because of her oneness with life in both the phenomenal and transcendental worlds, the lady is nature.

In this poem, "death" is used metaphorically to mean a loss of isolation, a loss of egocentric separation, a death of an "old" condition of the self. As he kisses her, the poet loses his sense of being separated and "becomes" her "kiss." He is both subordinate to her (a decoration that is becoming) and in unity with her. And through her he is at one with transcendent reality. The result of this death is rebirth; the poet finds "selves" which were unimaginable but which are now irretrievably his to keep. The lady has brought about a good death for the poet, a death of what only "seemed" to be himself. She has also brought him new birth; hers is the "light" into which his "spirit" is born.

The poet, it should be noted, has not said that the lady has become the sun; she has simply become his sun. She is his Beatrice or Margaret. He expects this admission to be taken by her as praise and homage, a reaffirmation of his devoted love.

#46 (CP 818) is intricately organized praise of the speaker's lady. It describes the transcendental rebirth of the earth which follows the fall of night in order to establish a condition which will, when used in an analogy, compliment the lady and describe her effect on the poet.

out of midsummer's blazing most not night
as floats a more than day whose sun is moon,
and our (from inexistence moving) sweet
earth puts on immortality again

-her murdered selves exchanging swiftly for
the deathlessness who's beauty: reoccurs
so magically, farthest becomes near
(one silent pasture, all a heartbeat dares;

that mountain, any god) while leaf twig limb
ask every question time can't answer: and
such vivid nothing as green meteors swim
signals all some world's millionaire mind

never may partly guess - thus, my love, to
merely what dying must call life are you

The difficulty of the poem lies in the complex syntax; the lady's effect cannot be fully appreciated until the metaphorical values of the description have been felt.

The night and day symbolize the dual yet unified nature of being. They are described in terms of each other; the day is "blazing most not night," while the night is a "more than day whose sun is moon." It is clear that the night is superior; it is a "more" whereas the day is a "not." And it is in the night that the "sweet/earth puts on immortality

again." In the night, distinctions and distances vanish to the sight, and the condition exists when "farthest becomes near," when transcendental timelessness occurs. In this condition, the earth attains "the deathlessness who's beauty," and the natural inhabitants ("leaf twig limb") are able to "ask every question time can't answer." This state of living spirituality, of "vivid nothing," is, of course, unavailable to the mass of humanity, "all some world's millinary mind."

The night, a traditional symbol of death, brings immortality to the earth. According to the equation, the lady has the same effect on the poet's life; that is, she lifts him from the phenomenal world into a timeless union with nature. If we understand that light or day is analogous to the poet's ego or reason, then the lady, by extinguishing that light, liberates the poet from his isolated state and permits him to become one with "vivid nothing." For him, "farthest becomes near." The idea that we have seen repeatedly in 73 Poems is explicit in this sonnet: the phenomenal must die in order for the transcendental to be attained. Escape from death is not possible.

Cummings treats physical death in #44 (CP 816), demonstrating his unshakeable faith in its necessity. A modification of the well-known children's prayer, "Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep," this sonnet sets forth the speaker's developing intention to lay himself down on a winter's evening "to dream of Spring."

The central metaphors of the poem are natural, and clearly set out: life is day and night is death. The speaker tells us that while life is "only loaned" to us, death is "given." I find the word "given" not only an appropriate contrast to "loaned" but also, in its mathe-

matical or logical sense, a highly suggestive metaphor. That is, death is an a priori fact of existence, a fact which must be accepted and dealt with. The poet not only accepts night and death as given, but he embraces them, for only in this night can one "dream of Spring," only through the gift of death can one attain rebirth.

Cummings generates a great deal of meaning by way of an ambiguity of structure in line ten. The word "nothing" functions two ways: once as the object of the infinitive phrase "to dream of," and again as the subject of the parenthetical clause it begins. In the first case, "nothing" is appositive to "something which nobody may keep." "Nothing" is a good word for a condition of timeless spirituality, for existence beyond the physical. And "nothing" certainly can be kept only by a "no-body"; that is, by one who is no longer locked into the physical, mortal world. Or, to put it another way, a body excludes one from keeping "nothing," the condition of transcendence.

Both "nothing" and "something which nobody may keep" are synonymous with "Spring." The poem tells us then that no one can keep Spring. This is true if one means by Spring a season of the year or a condition in time of new growth and development. But if Spring means the state of transcendence, then the poet is saying that transcendence cannot be attained permanently in the physical world; no body can keep it. And that is why the poet is gradually laying himself down (we should note the precise use of "lay") in the night/death; he knows now that he must sleep if he is to have his dream.

#45 (CP 817) is a mildly anti-scientific poem intended to reassure the poet's lady that she and her lover are dwellers in timelessness and

beyond the power of time. The poet is also reminding her of the dichotomies of their existence, of the opposition of timelessness to time, of transcendental to phenomenal, of themselves to mankind.

The lady has asked the poet the time. Perhaps detecting a hint of concern about time in her question, he responds strongly.

what time is it?it is by every star
a different time,and each most falsely true;
or so subhuman superminds declare

He is aware that modern science has established that time is not only an arbitrary measure of duration determined by the periodicity of some astronomical phenomenon but also that it changes from place to place, that time is a function of location and velocity. Time is "true" only relatively; it is "falsely" so because it is not absolute.

All the times of all the stars cannot "encompass" them, the poet
1
says. They are not subject to time; they are never creatures of "when" (Cummings' term for time past and future - the not-now), but always of "now," of timelessness. The lady and poet are in control and at home; they are "hosts of eternity," not "guests of seem."

The poet tells his lady in lines 9-11 that time is a product of man's will to power over things. It is a creation designed to render the phenomenal world, the realm of "seem," orderly and predictable. Yet

¹Cummings probably had in mind Shakespeare's sonnet CXVI when he chose "encompass." That poem is also about love, time, and death, and avers that

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks....

"time cannot children,poets,lovers tell/measure imagine,mystery,a kiss." These things, because they partake of the transcendental world, are not susceptible to that sort of control or manipulation. They cannot be known in a rational way; they must be felt, apprehended emotionally. Mankind, because it "would rather know than feel," mistrusts such mysteries of timelessness, and therefore stands in opposition to the poet and his lady, who need timelessness for a "whole life." Without timelessness, transcendence is impossible, and life becomes "merely to undie."

All this is not to be seen as a denial of the phenomenal world, as escapism, so much as reassurance that the lady and he continue to have a "whole life" possible. He is simply reminding her that they are ultimately outside time's power although in its grasp for the moment of earthly life. He wants to allay her suspected fears of age and death.

The volume, and Cummings' poetic career, ends with a beautiful sonnet which testifies to Cummings' final certainty of transcendental rebirth through love. The poet recognizes that men, living in time, tend to conceive of existence as separable into two distinct realms or worlds. Depending on one's particular variety of worldliness, one sees either with life's eye" or with "death's"; either things seem spirits" or "spirits in the guise of things appear." Man divides the universe into ideal and real, spiritual and material, because it is practical to do so; hence, "any world must always half perceive." We comprehend only partially, and see only a half of things, when we commit ourselves to a "world."

Only the artist and lover, because he is not committed, can achieve the desired totality of vision. He is not locked into any world; he is

forever born a foolishwise
proudhumble citizen of ecstasies
more steep than climb can time with all his years).

Only he is "free into the beauty of the truth" and able to live at the transcendental core of being.

While each "believing world," committed to a particular interpretation of events in time, "denies" another world's truth, the lover, cherishing all and able in seeing all to look "through both life and death," "timelessly celebrates the merciful/wonder no world deny may or believe." The poet knows that no world may deny or believe transcendental timeless unity because it cannot conceive of such as a "merciful wonder"; it cannot "create the whole." Only a lover, one who is willing to give up all, to forego all commitments to a "world," can "stroll the axis of the universe" and attain the still point at the center of all creation.

CONCLUSION

Cummings' sonnets demonstrate that the growth of his lebensphilosophie is a gradual but steady evolutionary process, by and large unmarked by serious doubts or reversals of position. Ultimately Cummings, beginning as a Platonic idealist, learns that the transcendental reality is attainable only through selfless acceptance of life in the phenomenal world.

Given "Plato's metaphor of the cave" with his "mother's milk" (i: six non-lectures, p. 9), Cummings at first conceives of existence as divided into two dichotomous yet related realms: a temporal world bounded by birth and death, and an infinitely superior, timeless realm of the spirit. The world of man is a corrupt, fallen version of the "actual" world of transcendence, and it is in this world, symbolized by the *demi-monde*, that most people dwell. The transcendental world, pure and perfect, is remote, and those who are aware of it feel only contempt for the phenomenal and desire for the noumenal. In this early period, death is usually feared as the cessation of being, although cherished at times as an avenue of escape to transcendence. Nature - untouched by man - is the nexus of the seen and the unseen, and Cummings finds in the processes of Nature his primary metaphors for the spiritual operations of the transcendental world.

As he matures, as he explores the problem of conducting his mortal life properly so as to attain union with a transcendent reality, Cummings

discovers that a species of transcendental being may be attained momentarily in life - that through love, through the surrender of self and its demands, and through a selfless acceptance of the "thou-ness" of external reality, instants of timelessness - seemingly of infinite duration - may be enjoyed by one still subject to time and death. It is these moments that give him the insight that timelessness and time are truly copresent. In this period he abandons the demimonde as a subject and focuses his attention on the general spiritual sins of mankind; he discovers that reliance upon received systems of thought and perception and on the human reason has led mankind into spiritual alienation (undeath) from Nature and the transcendental world. He also explores the proper relation of man to the self and the not-self, and he finds that one must live according to the pattern of nature, accepting birth, failure, and death because they are necessary aspects of being. The distance between the unworld and the transcendental world is felt to narrow in the middle sonnets; Nature becomes the manifestation of the transcendental in the temporal, and Cummings feels this copresence much more intensely. Consequently, he discovers in his moments of felt union with Nature his own capacity for transcendental life, and he now finds death a necessity, still frightening at times, but to be embraced rather than dreaded as simple dissolution. Death is also increasingly metaphorized in the middle sonnets, becoming an emblem of a necessary step in a cycle of birth and rebirth which inheres in the transcendental as well as the mortal world and which reassures the poet that rebirth is also inherent in the nature of things. Love, in the early sonnets a private spiritual and emotional state, is now generalized as the binding force uniting all

creation - temporal and timeless - into a whole. The poet's lady takes on more importance in the middle sonnets, and, like Nature, is praised for her transcendently elevating influence over the poet; she becomes his human avenue into transcendence and frequently seems to be a symbol for Nature.

The final phase of Cummings' philosophical progress is marked by his absolute acceptance of life in the temporal world. Transcendence and living transcendently in time become the same; Cummings finally accepts wholeheartedly the copresence of temporal and timeless which he has posited all along but which he has struggled to truly comprehend. Submitting now unreservedly to life in the phenomenal, surrendering all egoistic demands and commitments but always retaining his rights of choice as an individual, he embraces mortal life - explicitly trusting in time's "generosity" in order to attain transcendental life. Nature and transcendence fuse; death becomes a necessary good; and love, the condition of selfless acceptance and giving, is the "axis of the universe."

Cummings was never bothered by the problems of the existence of the outer world or the referential nature of language. He did not share in the experience of nihilism which J. Hillis Miller asserts is the starting point for so many modern writers. Nor did he believe in language as logos; he assumed that words referred to externals, and his

¹J. Hillis Miller, Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 1.

handling of words is aimed at releasing the meaning which inheres in them but which has been dulled by misuse and thoughtlessness. Cummings simply believes that man lives wrongly, that his relations with outer reality are defective because reason and the will to power over things have cut him off from a wholesome union with it. His struggle has been to apprehend the true condition of life in order to discover a way back into harmony. He finds that way in accepting utterly that we "lose all" to "whole find," and in selfless surrender to life he accomplishes what Miller has singled out as one of the main concerns of modern literary thought: an escape from the spiritually enervating and alienating subjectivism which so plagues modern man (p. 7). L. S. Dembo says that Cummings is a "realist," not an idealist, because he abandons his sub-¹jectivism and allows reality to possess him.

In my introductory remarks I suggested that Cummings' sonnets define an aesthetic stance toward life - a philosophical measure or context - which illuminates his work as a whole. While Cummings would very likely have objected on the grounds that each individual must be given the freedom to read and apprehend for himself, such a measure is particularly useful to his readers because many of his poems - particularly his impressionistic celebrations of a moment's emotions or of a dynamic scene - are seemingly insignificant; that is, they may capture

¹L. S. Dembo, Conceptions of Reality in Modern American Poetry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), p. 128.

the liveliness of an action or emotion, but (pace A. MacLeish) they do not always clearly mean. For example, the first poem of 95 Poems (CP 673) is an intriguing typographical tour de force which has prompted much critical interest.

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With some notion of Cummings' conception of egoism as a spiritually debilitating malady, the reader discovers that this poem is more than a clever typographical ideogram of a single leaf spiralling to earth; the meaning of "iness" becomes transparent, and the reader can see how this particular poem is a reflection of a general conception of life, not simply a random, ungrounded observation. The wholesome expansion of the reader's powers to understand reality as it exists beyond his rigid, preconceived thought processes and senses (always a motive behind Cummings' typographical experiments) is helped, even made possible sometimes, by such foreknowledge.

Cummings' sonnets are a highly significant and useful part of his work as a whole, a dimension long neglected but central to a full understanding of his achievement and one which well repays close scrutiny. They are a microcosm of his achievement, reflecting not only his major

thematic concerns and poetic technique, but also demonstrating his place in the sonnet tradition and showing that he is in the mainstream of the literary thought of our century.

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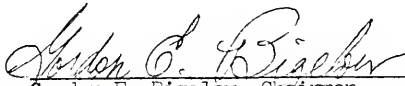
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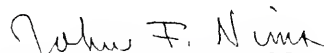
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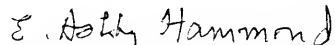
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